STREET SPIRIT

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JUSTICE NEWS & HOMELESS BLUES IN THE BAY AREA

Dona Spring's Life: *This Great Act of Kindness*

Dona Spring was truly a voice for the voiceless, whether she was advocating for animals, disabled humans, the environment, or homeless and poor people. She passionately opposed laws that would criminalize the homeless.

by Joan Clair

Dennis Walton, Dona Spring's partner of 27 years, said he first met Dona at Joshu-Ya, a Japanese restaurant located at that time on Telegraph Avenue near Dwight Way in Berkeley. He had been living in Oregon and shortly before returning to Berkeley, he had a dream in which he saw himself roughly in the same location where the restaurant was located.

In the same neighborhood as Joshu-Ya, he had just visited the Center for Independent Living (CIL), hoping to pick up referrals to help disabled people. He did not know that Dona Spring, who he was shortly to meet, had worked for CIL in their attendant referral service, trying to connect clients with attendants, before becoming disabled herself.

His meeting with Dona at Joshu-Ya was the result of a small, but significant, act of kindness. Dennis seated himself at the last remaining table in the restaurant, after which a couple came in. He gave up his table for the couple and went to the restaurant's bar. Shortly after he did this, Dona came into the restaurant and took the seat next to him.

Dennis broke the ice by pointing out a bottle on the counter which said, "Fill only with Kikkoman's soy sauce." He thought this was amusing considering once the bottle was empty, it was empty; and what kind of claim on any particular soy sauce can be made by an empty bottle? Dona also found this amusing, and after talking a while each discovered a rapport with the other.

Dona was looking for a live-in helper, and Dennis was looking for exactly that kind of job. Dona offered the job to Dennis, and he accepted it. Dona told me that later she cried tears of gratitude. She felt Dennis was a helper divinely sent and meant!

This turned out to be true. Dona had found not just a round-the-clock, live-in attendant, but a soul mate, a spiritual companion and a brother who would help her in every aspect of her life, most recently as her primary City Council aide. Just as Dennis felt guided to return to Berkeley and to the location where he met Dona, she recognized a soul mate and friend, one who would be by her side in all the challenges she would meet.

Dennis said that if he had not given up the table in Joshu-Ya, he might not have met Dona. One small act of kindness led to a relationship which provided a foundation for Dona's work — work which, in itself, was and remains an act of kindness and a gift to all beings. Dona and Dennis served together in a model of relationship which is almost unheard of in our time.

When I first met Dona Spring in the early 1980s, she had founded an organization named DIIAAR (Disabled and Incurably Ill for Alternatives to Animal Research). The purpose of the group was to make the statement that disabled people did not want animals experimented on and tortured on their behalf. Dona, who suffered from rheumatoid arthritis and was already in a wheelchair, said she would rather suffer herself than have animals suffer in the name of alleviating her suffering.

She did not believe the alleviation of human suffering should be based on animal suffering. Her thinking in this regard came very close to Gandhi's thoughts. He has been quoted as saying, "I abhor vivisection with my whole soul. All the scientific discoveries stained with innocent blood I count as of no consequence."

For most of the time I knew her, Dona was a vegan as a result of her concern for the abuse and suffering of animals who are used for food production. A few months before she passed on, however, she regretfully told me that her body was rejecting plant protein and that, just to survive, she was occasionally consuming small quantities of seafood, usually scallops.

I report this here because I believe that her choice not to allow herself to die as a result of holding on to a principle to the point of no positive benefit to herself or others, including the many others who depended on her, showed the depth of her spirituality. Dona Spring was not a dogmatic purist who persecuted herself or others.

I like to think of Dona as a practical prophet. Dennis Walton said she was a practical prophet, not a practicing profiteer! Michael Parenti, a well-known author, after a recent showing of a film created by Lindsay Vurek and Valerie Trost, "Courage in Life and Politics: The Dona Spring Story," said that Dona was incorruptible and couldn't be bought — a quality which can be troubling to the powers that be.

Parenti said she was uncompromising on matters of truth, but not immune to reality issues. Most prophets don't traditionally hold posts in government, but Dona held a government office for the longest period of time of any Green Party member in the United States.

As a member of the Berkeley City Council, Dona Spring was truly a voice for the voiceless, whether she was advocating for animals, disabled humans, the environment, or homeless and low-income people. For the most part, her work bore fruit for all she advocated for. When she didn't get initial support, she would keep fighting for what she believed. Her popularity or the popularity or unpopularity of an issue had nothing to do with the stand she took.

She passionately opposed all laws that

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"Alive in Her." **An iconic portrait of the divine mother.** Art by Joan Clair

Joan Clair's faceless portrait of the Divine Mother is painted in gold in the tradition of icons. This artwork depicts Mary as the Universal Mother who loves and cares for all creatures. She gives compassion and mercy to "the least of these" — the brokenhearted and sorrowful ones, the oppressed and persecuted, the homeless and hungry.

A Tribute to the Women of Conscience and Conviction

This special issue of *Street Spirit* honors the memory of Dona Spring and Susan Prather — and the many women of conscience and conviction who have given so much in the struggle to end homelessness. These stories come from the last five years of *Street Spirit*, and pay tribute to the dedicated women who have inspired us with their unforgettable courage and their steadfast commitment to seeking justice for homeless people.

Recently, the Bay Area mourned the deaths of Susan Prather, the lionhearted homeless advocate from Walnut Creek, and Dona Spring, the compassionate and principled member of the Berkeley City Council. Also, Sister Bernie Galvin, director of Religious Witness with Homeless People, announced this month that she is saying goodbye to her 15 years of homeless activism. In light of these passages, it now seems fitting to celebrate the remarkable bravery of these women who have devoted themselves to the great cause of justice for the poorest among us.

Comforting the Afflicted, Afflicting the Comfortable

Street Spirit Interview with Susan Prather

Interview by Maureen Hartmann

Up until the moment of her death on July 29, 2008, Susan Prather championed the rights of the homeless residents of Contra Costa County, a role which often led her to cross swords with city and county officials and an unresponsive bureaucracy.

Dorothy Day described the work of the homeless advocate as "comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable." Prather exemplified that spirit. She was a tireless advocate for more housing and more human services for homeless people in a largely conservative county that has too often remained in denial about the growing extent of poverty in the very midst of affluence.

Her role as a homeless activist in a county that would prefer to ignore the problem of poverty immersed Prather in controversy time and again. Since the late 1970s, she besieged county officials with demands for more humane treatment for the poor, while simultaneously befriending many homeless individuals in Contra Costa County.

During the 1980s, Prather lobbied the federal government for housing legislation, and took part in many nonviolent protests for the nation's homeless people. But she found that even successful campaigns for more funding from the federal government too often led to cold and detached services for homeless people.

Alongside her activism, Prather demonstrated personal commitment to helping homeless people as individuals, one by one. Sometimes using her own financial resources, she helped people find employment, aided them with housing expenses, and helped them travel to return to relatives. She provided a listening ear for the newly employed, enabling them to keep their jobs.

From 1992 through 1996, Prather directed the Advocacy Project, using her own funds; it provided a toll-free telephone number that homeless people could use for referrals to needed services. She personally answered this service 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Another of her successful activities was to struggle against the closing of the county hospital. As a consequence of this effort, the state-of-the-art Contra Costa Regional Medical Center now serves the homeless and low-income people.

In 1997 and 1998, working with the West County Gray Panthers and the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights, Prather made possible a successful lawsuit by homeless people in West Contra Costa County that resulted in their winning financial atonement for wrongful police conduct. Also in 1998, Prather was effective in preventing the first attempt to close Doctor's Hospital in Pinole.

In 1999, the City of Walnut Creek hired Prather to launch a new homeless program, using money bequeathed for that purpose by a private citizen. Prather founded the Fresh Start Program, which opened its doors to the homeless in 1999; and when the city's money ran out, she was able to continue Fresh Start as a non-profit organization by seeking private funding, donations and grants.

Fresh Start provides a protected, peaceful atmosphere, a place like home for homeless people. It provides a light lunch, and phones that can be used for housing/employment contacts, medical appointments, and family contacts. It also provides bathing facilities, washers and dryers, laundry supplies, an iron and ironing board, individually tailored case-management, an encouraging atmosphere, and advocacy for county, state, and federal benefits. Available, too, are volleyball, badminton, and frisbee for just plain fun.

Prather was the recipient of many awards for her work. In the spring of 2001, she received the "For People Who Care" award from the Contra Costa Continuum of Care Board. In the spring of 2002 she accepted the "Women Working for Justice" award by the Contra Costa County Commission for Women. For work done in the spirit of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. she received in 2004 honorable mention in the Contra Costa County Humanitarian awards ceremony. In 2004, the *Walnut Creek Journal* called Prather one of "Six People Who Made Our Lives Better in 2003."

Prather was born in Vallejo, California, the youngest in a family of three children. She ran the Fresh Start program with her husband, Bill Lunghi.



Susan Prather (at left), the founder of Fresh Start, and Denise. Lydia Gans photo

"These days all homeless people are all painted with the same brush. Nobody wants homeless people, or people in halfway houses, or mental health issues or addiction issues. It's horrible. Everybody says, 'We don't want those people here.' It frightens me the amount of hate that comes out at those times. The hate and the fear." — Susan Prather

Maureen Hartmann: *What influences from your childhood contributed to your present work with homeless people?*

Susan Prather: I grew up in a restaurant. My father owned a bar and a restaurant, and we had it all my life until I was a young adult. Growing up, my brothers and I were always taught to talk to people, to treat people with respect — that you get it back when you do that.

As long as my mother and father had the restaurant, if anybody was hungry, they were served, regardless of whether they had money. And I think I learned. A lot of what I do now came from that. Later when my brother had a restaurant, he always took care of people who had no food and were needy. They were always very giving. I think some of that is ingrained in me, the lessons I learned there.

MH: *How did going through adolescence and young adulthood affect your perception of the homeless?*

SP: I think because I was always a person who was larger than everybody else, I know what it is like to be shut out, to be an outcast and not to be part of a group of which everyone else is a part. I think there's a lot of that, and that was certainly true as a teenager, and as a young woman. Those feelings always stay with you. I think I give people now what I never got then.

MH: *Did higher education prepare you to work with the homeless?*

SP: The only higher education that I had was on the streets, and it taught me all I know. I had a year or two of college, nothing spectacular. Everything I learned, I learned from the people I served, and from people like Terry Messman, Mitch Snyder, and others.

MH: *What did you learn from people like Mitch Snyder?*

SP: To never give up. When I first started to do this work, Mitch Snyder was a very good friend and a mentor. He really blew people off if they didn't take people seriously who were poor and homeless. He always said, if you're going to do this you have to see it through because the people you're representing have no voice. They have no power, and that's (who) you're going to be for them. So you have to do whatever it takes to get them what they need.

MH: *What about Terry Messman?*

SP: I learned from Terry some of the similar things that I learned from Mitch. We did a tent city and a march in Richmond — the first one ever when the homeless people I had organized held a march. Terry came with the Oakland Union of the Homeless, and I think he taught me something very important, and that is that you never back down.

The police were very upset that we were doing that march and they were also very patronizing. They told us that we could march, but we had to stay on the sidewalk. And I saw Terry right away. He started yelling at everybody, "Take the streets!" Pretty soon McDonald Avenue was flooded with homeless people and me and Terry. Nobody touched us; nobody bothered with us; nobody told us to stop. But, you know, we didn't have to mind. We were there to talk back, and you don't talk back effectively if you don't take the streets. And that's what we did.

MH: *How does working with homeless people affect your personal relationships?*

SP: I've had good, good friends all my life. I think I take the gift of friendship that I've received from the people that I love and care about, and that transfers to the people I meet and the people I serve. And I think that's a true gift and I get it back. We (Susan and her husband) just have wonderful friendships and wonderful moments and experiences.

MH: *Is your work with homeless people motivated by spirituality or faith?*

SP: That's hard. I don't believe in the things that we hear today about Jesus and God. I don't think the God that is talked about today or the Jesus that is talked about today is the person who said all those wonderful things that are in the Bible. Because they don't match. I'm a spiritual person. I think that what we learn here and what we acquire here and the knowledge and love that we share — I don't think it ends with our death. I think somewhere that energy has to go. We spend all this time learning and loving. I think I'm more spiritual than religious. And I think people are entitled to believe what they believe without any problem. Nobody should judge people on that either. I believe strongly in the separation of church and state.

MH: *What were the circumstances in terms of work, relationships, and spiritual life that led you to advocate in the 1980s for homeless people in Contra Costa County?*

SW: I had met a man in the mid-1970s who was homeless and I helped him and had a good friendship with him. He was a part of my life until he died in 1990. He became a good friend and part of the family. I started helping people one at a time. And as the 1980s came, when homeless people became so visible on the street, a soup kitchen opened in Richmond, and I continued to help people one at a time.

Pretty soon people started to ask where I was or how to get in touch with me, and it became bigger than me. It just kind of happened. They were there and I was there and I had these skills. I wasn't afraid of the bureaucrats or politicians. So it seemed like a natural match. I knew how to get people what they needed, or at least where to go. Homeless people were there. It happened. It was nothing that was planned on my part. It just grew.

Then there were two women. I was a part of the West County Gray Panthers, which I still am. There were two women in the Gray Panthers, Jean Siri and Fancheon Christner. We started to go to meetings and talk about homelessness, and we'd gather clothes and food and look up the legislation around homelessness.

We were so obnoxious and abrasive that nobody wanted to see us coming, no politician, nobody in a meeting. But that's what you have to do to get people's attention. We were also very funny. The *Tribune* named us "the Wild Women of West County."

Jean Siri is on the East Bay Regional Park's Board of Directors now, and she's in her mid-80s, and Fancheon has died years ago. Jean is and Fanchion was an incredible woman. The women who have influenced me mostly were the women I've known through the Gray Panthers. When I was younger, I was their youngest member. They were great role models for me. And now I'm almost the oldest one in our group.

These women have done all these remarkable things all their lives. I wanted to be one of those women. They fought for freedoms during the McCarthy era. My friend Natalie Glasou just turned 80. A Gray Panther, she provided encouragement

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Bob Campbell's Eloquent Eulogy to Susan Prather

Editor's note: Susan Prather, the director of the Fresh Start homeless program in Walnut Creek, died of cancer on July 29, 2008. Former State Assemblyman Bob Campbell, who had worked with Prather for many years on homeless issues, sent this remarkable tribute to her life's work to her husband Bill Lunghi. Campbell's eloquent testimonial was then delivered as the keynote address at Prather's memorial service, held at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Walnut Creek on August 28, 2008.



Susan Prather at work at her Fresh Start homeless program. Lydia Gans photo

All of you who knew Susan Prather and had her in your life, even for a brief moment, were truly blessed, for you had the chance to witness true human greatness, something but very few humans will ever experience. I share in your loss and will remember her for as long as I am.

Dear Bill Lunghi & the Prather Family:

I am sending you this letter with the heaviest of hearts on the passing of your wife, family member and one of my dear friends. It has taken me a few weeks, since I first heard of Susan's passing, to find the words to express these few thoughts to you and your family. It isn't the words that one chooses but rather the way in which they are put together that lets a person know one's true feelings. May this humble attempt be adequate enough.

I have known Susan from the very first day of my political career (1975) and we have been friends ever since, even when, from time to time, she chose to question my sanity because of things I did or said. Her first comments to me, when first we met, were: "I am supporting you because Gary Fernandez says you are a good guy " (Gary Fernandez was a good friend of Susan's and was on the Richmond City Council when I was running).

I have been searching my mind thinking of who else that I knew was as dedicated and driven to help others as was Susan Prather-Lunghi and after literally days of thinking about it, the only other name that comes to mind was Cesar Chavez. There are obviously many other great humanitarians in the world, but I never personally met them, Cesar Chavez was one I had met and with whom I dined.

There are literally thousands of human beings who were helped because one person, Susan Prather, made a difference. One person, who herself, went without food, fancy clothes, a permanent place to stay and who was ridiculed and scorned because she had the temerity to question those in high places about how they were doing nothing to protect some of their fellow human beings whose lives had fallen on hard times.

Susan did all of this at a time when virtually every segment of our society had its champion and in some cases, champions; the exception being the homeless. She did it when no one cared about the homeless because in their minds the reason some persons were homeless was because "they brought it upon themselves." Susan knew differently, she knew that hard times could happen to anyone and anyone's family and I believe that history has proven her right, especially during these difficult times in which we now find ourselves.

I believe that Susan's happiest days (except for the day she married Bill Lunghi) were when she was a part of that illustrious group known as the "Wild Women of the West;" which was made up of the likes of Fanchone Christner, Barbara Vincent, Virginia Rice, Jean Siri, Lucretia Edwards and a few others. A group of women who had fought similar battles for decades before Susan and took her under their collective wings and helped to fine tune those skills that made Susan the great person she had become.

It is my most sincere belief that Susan has done more to further the cause of humanity than any publicly elected official that comes to mind. She practiced what most politicians and clergy just talk about. She pushed us to do more for those who had nothing and needed help; she was, to use an old saying, a friend to those who had no friends and an enemy to those who made her an enemy. In fact, she became such a force that every politician, community leader or corporate captain shuddered when she came to call.

Susan Prather came along in our history just when we needed someone like her. She was, in reality, one of those things that historians call "Change Agents." History is filled with persons who came around at the right time to effectuate change, some of it bad and much of it good; Susan Prather was a "Change Agent," for the good. Even in these difficult times it will be awhile before there is another such "Change Agent" as Susan Prather.

All of you who knew Susan Prather and had her in your life, even for a brief moment, were truly blessed, for you had the chance to witness true human greatness, something but very few humans will ever experience. I share in your loss and will remember her for as long as I am.

The Ancient Chinese have a saying that in life there are no endings but only beginnings, for once you know someone, especially if that person has made an impact on you, they will always be with you, they will be but a single thought away; may you think of her often as will I.

With the greatest of sympathies.

Bob Campbell, Assemblyman, 11th dist., Retired

Susan Prather Interview

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and support. It was a great friendship that I desperately needed at that time.

MH: *What was the focus of your homeless activism in the 1980s?*

SP: It was the Right to Shelter legislation that Mitch Snyder had passed in Washington, D.C., and allocating more money for people who were homeless. And in Contra Costa County we were fighting just simply to get a shelter open. We did not have a shelter and they did not want a shelter open.

What started really the whole thing with Jean and Fanchion and I is that the county administrator at that time had turned millions away in federal funding because he said Contra Costa had no homeless people. Our crusade was really to get attention for the people who needed shelter and services. We did it well. That was what I did in the '80s. I brought them to the forefront and kept that issue in the news, just by saying, "Yes there are people here who are homeless, who need things." Because the politicians just denied its very existence.

MH: *What other formative experiences did you go through when homelessness increased drastically in the 1980s?*

SP: I can remember when crack came to the streets. I was working on the streets at that time helping people. And it was almost overnight that crack changed the very being of people. It was just incredible. It was like things took a shift and they never came back. People were really struggling to get housing and jobs, and have leadership in their communities. All of a sudden, there was this incredible drug called crack that everybody was after. You could buy a piece for a dollar.

It was just horrible. It was just horrible. It was just unbelievable. To be there at that time and watch the crack flood the streets, and then it would be pulled back by whoever was dealing, and then there would be hell. It was just amazing. I certainly wasn't a part of it, but I was there to observe it. It was watching people drop into hell, because they never came back.

Tied to that is another incident with a man that I really helped a lot. He and his family were just terrific people. They had been homeless a long time. He had kicked heroin at one time. He was very proud of that. He was doing very well. Then he tried crack. I can remember it was a rainy night near the soup kitchen. He was a great big guy. He just hugged me and hugged me. He said, "I just can't stop this. I kicked heroin. This was so different." He just knew his life had been shot. Later he made it back, but only when he had a very serious illness. It's tragic. The whole thing is just tragic (in its effects on) people and families and babies and children.

MH: *How did the homeless problem in Contra Costa County changed from the 1980s to the 1990s, and to the present?*

SP: I do know that when my father had his restaurant in the '50s and '60s, that people that were called homeless then (would) ride the trains and come in and eat. My father always fed everybody.

In the 1980s, homelessness could have been manageable. They had shelters and

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Street Spirit

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Kerry's Kids — A Dream That Wouldn't Die

The undying devotion of an Oakland pediatrician leaves a lasting legacy of health care for homeless children.

by Terry Messman



Dr. Kerry Spooner-Dean provides health care to Oakland children in a mobile medical van — her life's dream.

Oakland pediatrician Karen Kruger doesn't look much like your standard-issue medical doctor as she sprawls on the floor of an emergency shelter, laughing and reading out loud to a group of giggling, excitable kids, with her own five-year-old son balanced precariously on her lap, while simultaneously throwing a football to Bobby Hill, an exuberant seven-year-old boy with a strong, but wild arm.

This isn't your traditional, antiseptic hospital environment either — this is a shelter for scores of homeless people in Berkeley run by BOSS (Building Opportunities for Self-Sufficiency). And Karen Kruger, M.D., who just came off a 24-hour shift as a pediatrician at Children's Hospital in Oakland, is not outfitted in a sterile white coat and air of clinical detachment. She's wearing blue jeans and bearing teddy bears for her patients, and she's come to a homeless shelter as an unpaid volunteer, with two of her own young children in tow, to provide free "house calls" to children whose only home is a shelter.

The kids she's seeing aren't paying customers, or covered by medical plans or health insurance. No, they're Kerry's Kids. They're the children loved and cared for in absentia by Kerry Spooner-Dean, a brilliant young pediatrician whose life was cut short when she was brutally murdered in her Oakland home in May 1998.

Everyone who works at the mobile health clinic that now bears her name is aware that Kerry Spooner-Dean's life dream was to deliver free medical care to the very doorsteps of homeless shelters and battered women's refuges so the poorest children would not be shut out of the health-care system.

And every pediatrician, every volunteer for Kerry's Kids, every van driver, every family member raising funds, knows that Kerry entrusted her kids to them to care for now that she no longer can. They know it is a sacred trust. In carrying out Kerry's last dream, they are caring for the children she was forced to leave behind.

The homeless children being immunized and cared for in the East Bay — at Harrison House in Berkeley, and the Salvation Army, Women's Refuge, and the Henry Robinson Multi-Service Center in Oakland — are Kerry's legacy to us, the part of her spirit that outlived her short life. She left a lasting impression on the talented doctors and dedicated volunteers who are now keeping alive her vision of free and accessible health care for the poorest children of all.

The brilliant young doctor, only 30 when she was murdered, dreamed of overcoming the lack of health insurance, the institutional obstacles, the language barriers and transportation difficulties that prevented homeless children from accessing health care. She was one of those rare people with the gift of inspiring others to carry on her dream, even beyond the span of her short life.

Karen Kruger, Kerry's friend and fellow pediatrician at Children's Hospital Oakland said, "It's interesting to be so young and to have her work live on, to be so young and yet accomplish the kind of work that *could* live on. You know, most people spend their lifetime trying to accomplish that."

During her lifetime, Kerry was already making that dream come true, by anyone's standards, through her work as a pediatrician at Children's Hospital, one of the finest pediatric hospitals on the West Coast. Matthew Uretsky, a volunteer coordinator at Kerry's Kids, notes that many doctors at Children's Hospital could double their incomes by working elsewhere, but are dedicated to working at a facility that accepts all children at the door, no matter their income levels.

The children left behind

But in the course of her three-year residency, Kerry realized that many children never made it to Children's Hospital in the first place — homeless kids who languished without medical attention in the shelters of Berkeley and Oakland; kids whose parents had been evicted and had to scramble day and night for shelter and food; kids whose moms had been battered and were living in fear in a women's refuge; children from refugee families whose parents didn't speak enough English to navigate the incomprehensible maze of medical insurance forms; kids whose parents were too bone-tired from standing in soup-kitchen lines to take four bus-transfers to keep a doctor's appointment for an immunization.

Dr. Kerry Spooner-Dean's central insight was that health care had to be delivered to homeless children, not the other way around. Dr. Karen Kruger, who supervised and taught Kerry during her residency at Children's Hospital, saw Kerry's dream take shape over the years.

"In the short time between when she finished her residency and when she was killed, she wanted to go a step further," Kruger said. That next step was a mobile health van that carried free medical care directly to children in homeless shelters.

The dream came closer to reality when Oakland Head Start donated the van, and closer still when Kerry completed her residency and passed the rigorous final exam in pediatrics in January 1998.

Then, tragically, the dreamer died.

A few months after passing her final medical exam, Kerry was stabbed to death in her Rockridge home on May 5, 1998, by Jerrol Glen Woods, a carpet cleaner hired to clean the rugs in her home.

Woods had seven prior felony convictions and had served 12 years in federal prison for a bank robbery before his release on probation in 1996. He was caught a week after the murder using Kerry's stolen credit cards, and admitted to the police his guilt in the brutal killing. He entered a guilty plea to murder with special circumstances, and was sentenced to life in prison without parole on August 4, 1998.

'Ongoing acts of kindness'

Kerry was killed a few weeks before the fifth anniversary of her marriage to architect Daniel Dean. Immediately after his wife's murder, Daniel said: "We are focused on turning this horrific act of violence into several ongoing acts of kindness." He was as good as his word.

Kerry's family and medical friends refused to let her dream die. Karen Kruger said in an interview with *Street Spirit*: "Kerry had this dream. She had many things started, and then her death was so sudden and seemingly purposeless and shocking that I think there was a need for people that loved her to carry on her memory in a way that she would look down on from her cloud and be happy about. A bunch of people loved her. A bunch of people were in the same field at the place she worked, and she had already made a lot of connections."

The words "undying devotion" leap to mind in trying to understand Kerry's dedication to the cause of free, accessible health care for the poorest children — because, as it turned out, even death could not stop her dream. Her friends and family labored to create Kerry's Kids literally in defiance of her tragic death.

Bob Savio, M.D., worked closely with Kerry during their residency together at Children's Hospital, and has volunteered with Kerry's Kids for three years now, providing pediatric care to homeless children at Henry Robinson Multi-Service Center in downtown Oakland. He said Kerry's dream has helped fill a very serious gap in health care in the East Bay.

"Her dream was to help out inner-city kids in Oakland," Dr. Savio explained. "She saw a deep need. Before Kerry's Kids there was no free medical care for kids in Oakland. It blew me away when I came to Oakland from Seattle, where there are great homeless clinics. It blew me away to be in a big urban center with a lot of socioeconomic need that had no resources for free medical care for kids in the city. Kerry saw that too."

A funny, sunny, joyful person

In interviews today, nearly four years after her death, her friends, medical colleagues and family talk about Kerry's funny, sunny, joyful personality with as much fresh enthusiasm as if they had just had lunch with her. They remember her medical knowledge and brilliance. But it was something else — her love — that they say makes Kerry unforgettable.

"She's just one of those unbelievably kind, gentle, very warm people," Dr. Savio said. "It always seems like horrible things happen to the most wonderful people, and that is what happened to her."

Savio still draws inspiration from Kerry's life. "Knowing Kerry inspired those around her to do good — not just to make money but to do good."

Kruger said, "She was extraordinarily bright; she just had tremendous knowledge. But probably even more important than that is her heart. I mean she just loved the kids, loved their parents; she had no judgment of anyone's choices. Whatever went on in the family, she was just there supporting them and loving them."

Kruger said that Kerry reminded her most of Susan Sarandon's portrayal of the unconditional love shown by Catholic nun Helen Prejean in "Dead Man Walking." Kruger explained, "Kerry was more giggly and humorous, but to have that love is an extraordinary quality, a rare quality. Her brightness was great, but her other qualities were more rare."

Smiles, like beauty, may be only skin deep in some. Dr. Savio said that Kerry's warmth and joyfulness came from deeper places, for she had a lasting acquaintance with pain long before her death. "She just wore her smile all the time," he said. "But she lived in incredible physical pain, multiple back injuries. She was smiling all the time but living with really bad pain."

Kerry's family keeps it alive

Kerry's extended family and in-laws were instrumental in founding Kerry's Kids, providing the administrative know-how, finding the financial support, and above all, being the sheer driving force needed to jump-start a mobile health clinic and keep it rolling all these years.

Dr. Kruger explained: "They took care of all those practical things completely, for one. But I also think that the spirit — the desire for this to work, their availability — has made this possible. Kerry's family, who are not medical, had such love for her, and just wanted to make this work, coming to us, working together, and just breaking their necks to make everything happen. I think they kept it alive."

Kathy Dean, Kerry's mother-in-law,

See **Kerry's Undying Dream** *page 22*

Spiritual Solidarity with the Poorest of the Poor

Interview with Sister Bernie Galvin

by Maureen Hartmann

As founder and director of Religious Witness with Homeless People, Sister Bernie Galvin has been a leading light in defending the human rights of homeless people in San Francisco. After 15 years of activism in solidarity with the poorest of the poor, Sister Bernie announced in September 2008 that she is leaving her work with Religious Witness. A farewell gathering will be held for her on Sunday, September 14, from 3:00-5:00 p.m., at Congregation Beth Sholom in San Francisco.

Sister Bernie was born in St. Charles, Missouri, and raised in northeast Oklahoma. She has been a member of the Sisters of Divine Providence, based in San Antonio, Texas, for 45 years.

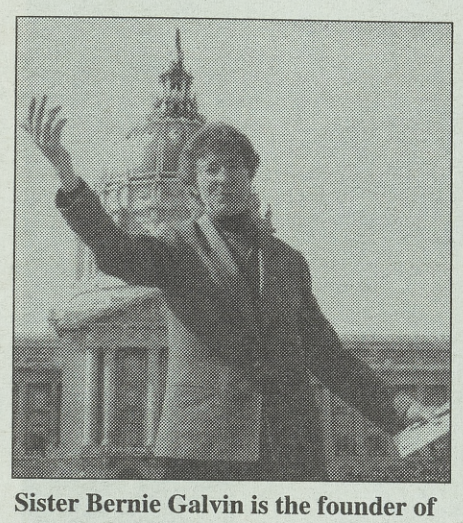
She attended Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio, Texas, and received a B.A. in 1957 and a M.Ed. in 1965. Sister Bernie Galvin taught school (mostly junior high) for 17 years in Texas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma.

Following her years as a teacher, she helped organize some of the most underpaid workers in the South. Between 1972 and 1980, she organized sugar cane field and mill workers in South Louisiana.

In 1980 and 1981 she was employed in a J. P. Stevens cotton mill. She wanted to experience the life of a textile worker. From 1981 to 1986, she organized textile workers in the Hanes hosiery and T-shirt mills in Appalachia (Virginia and the Carolinas) around the health issue of tendonitis and carpal tunnel syndrome.

From 1986 to 1989, she organized nursing homes for the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) in the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia. She also organized this union's Workers' Associations Program in two state mental hospitals in Virginia.

In 1989, Sister Bernie moved to Berkeley to take a two-year sabbatical from her order. From 1991 to 1993, she worked for SEIU Local 250 organizing in health care facilities in the Bay Area.

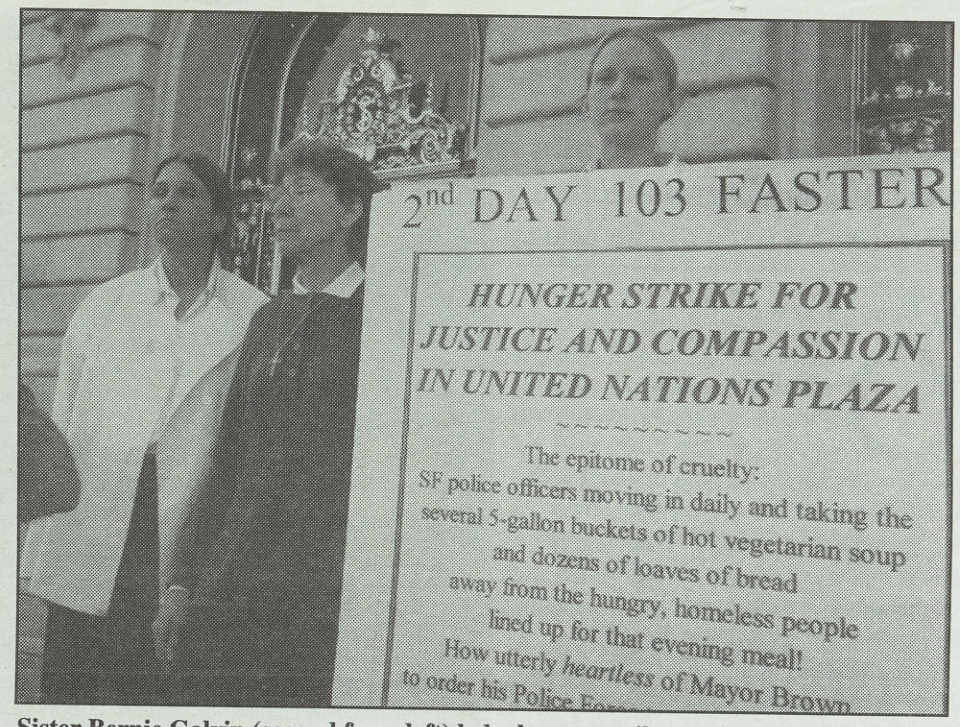


Sister Bernie Galvin is the founder of Religious Witness with Homeless People.

In 1993, Sister Bernie founded Religious Witness with Homeless People, which, she says, "seeks to address the true causes of poverty and homelessness, and aims to shift the public debate away from stereotyping and towards the real issue of providing needed housing and support services for those desperately in need."

In 1999, she started Religious Leaders' National Call for Action on Housing, an undertaking of Religious Witness that combines forces with Housing America to seek funds from the federal government for low-income housing throughout the United States.

Sister Bernie has received several awards: the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* Local Hero Award in 1995 and 1999; the American Jewish Congress Mensches in the Trenches Award in 1997; Regional Pax Christi USA's Peace Award in 1997; the Metropolitan Community of San Francisco Church's Saints Alive Award in 1998 and 1999; and a Letter of Commendation from Secretary Andrew Cuomo, U.S. Dept of Housing and Urban Development in 2000.



Sister Bernie Galvin (second from left) led a hunger strike on the steps of San Francisco City Hall to protest Mayor Brown's crackdown on Food Not Bombs.

"What I saw glaringly absent was the united voice of the faith community speaking out against this vicious attack on poor people. Over 135,000 citations, arrests and jailing of poor people have occurred in San Francisco."

Maureen Hartmann: *What influences from your upbringing and from your childhood and adolescence have contributed to your present-day commitment to working with homeless people?*

Sister Bernie Galvin: Well, I consider myself quite fortunate to have been born poor, and I really mean that. (I was) born into a large family of 15 kids. My dad was a union man — he was a plumber — and we always struggled as working people to survive. Consciousness was raised in us kids with daddy working as a union member. So being born Democrat, Catholic, union, as a poor person, is basically what has shaped my entire life, and (that) despite the suffering and the struggle of my whole family. (When) dad was on strike — we were always on strike...

Concern for the poor, coming from (my) background, has always been integral to the person I am. And when we are true to who we are, we will respond to the needs in society. And in my case, this is to the needs of working poor people, of homeless poor people, of poor elderly people. And we simply need to follow our hearts, follow the dictates of our heart, which stem from our faith, from our experiences in early childhood. It is never a question of struggling with what we do with our lives. It's simply a question of saying "yes" as soon as we see the need.

MH: *What religious order did you enter and how has the charism of your community contributed to the spirit of your work?*

SBG: I guess it was not by accident that the Sisters of Divine Providence from San Antonio, Texas, had a school in my home town, and I went to the Sisters of Divine Providence all through my elementary and high school (years). The whole founding of the Sisters of Divine Providence was (based) on reaching out to the poor children in their rural areas, especially to educate them, and especially, to educate young girls who were deprived of educational opportunities.

We were founded (on) caring for the poor. That is our charism, one of simplicity, and one of caring for the poor. There again, it's simply an extension of who I was born to be.

MH: *How did your spiritual journey lead you to get involved in Religious Witness with Homeless People?*

SBG: I had worked as a Sister of Divine Providence. I had taught school to poor children in rural areas for 17 years. My last assignment was in south Louisiana. It was a little town, a sugar cane plantation town. It was shocking. The social, political, religious setup in that town was absolutely shocking to the soul. The whole town was based on growing sugar; there was a sugar mill there.

The whole town was Catholic. The black sugar cane workers, field workers and mill workers were on one side of town, and it was a very small town. The white growers were on the other side of town. All the white people who were not actually sugar cane growers at least leased their land to the wealthy sugar cane growers. Our school had been there for 73 years; it had never been integrated. So that in itself was shocking, that we as a Catholic school and as Catholic sisters had been satisfied with the status quo, with the discrimination with regard to the children in our school.

I was principal in our school. I was quite popular in the school. I was a good teacher, and I related well with the children and the parents. The second year I was there I integrated the school. And you would think that I had just wrecked society. There was such a cold response to that. I survived it. I just went on with my life. That died down.

What never died down was that on weekends I started getting involved with the families (of) the black sugar cane workers. (They lived) in shacks on the plantations. I started listening to their families, tutoring their children after school. I get very emotional about this. It's so hard on me when anybody is treated unjustly, but especially the poor. I got involved with listening to the poor. I got involved with asking the questions why anybody would have to live like this. Why the wages were so low, when there was so much profit.

So I got more deeply involved in that, and finally the growers went to the bishop. They first tried to get me out of the school, thinking that if I were out of the school, I would leave town. I said as a United States citizen, I would do what I want to. I didn't let them push me out of the school. I waited one whole year, until they gave up trying, and then I resigned. They thought I would leave town.

What I actually did was to move into the black community, and to work full time organizing cane workers around their issues of poverty, the wages, the home conditions. At that point, they went to the bishop to try to order me out. He sent his representative, who said the bishop wanted me to leave town. (But) I stayed there 11 years in that little town.

MH: *Why did you stay?*

SBG: It's responding to what you see. I saw the injustice of discrimination against black children. I saw the unjust treatment of the poor cane workers. Whatever you see, whatever you are, you respond to that.

I burned out. After 11 years I felt called to move on. In your heart, you know it's time. This was in the late 1970s, the early '80s, when the whole J. P. Stevens campaign (against ill treatment of textile workers) was going on. And there was some concentrated efforts among the churches across the nation to support the J. P. Stevens workers. This other sister was working together with me down there all those years. We just packed everything we owned and drove off to South Carolina — not knowing where we're going, what we're doing, (just that) we were going to work with textile workers.

So we simply drove to a mill town, Greenville, South Carolina, which was the headquarters of the J. P. Stevens cotton mill. We drove into the town, went into what they call the plantation where (there was) the mill. And you have all the people living right around the mill. We rented a trailer just about a half block from the mill.

We went there every day to apply for a job. We went under cover; we changed our identity, not our names. We didn't say we were sisters. We worked in a J. P. Stevens mill for one year to acclimate ourselves from the agricultural South to the textile-industrial Appalachia area. We swept floors; we cleaned the looms — that was quite an experience. We just really learned about the whole situation and the plight of textile workers.

MH: *Did that experience lead you to begin organizing with the workers?*

SBG: We came out of that and began organizing textile workers. We first organized around a health issue, which was epidemic with all the textile workers in all the textiles — J.P. Stevens, Hanes, and so forth. (It) was equivalent to a trauma disorder better known as tendonitis. We worked five or six years on that issue. We held hearings, we had demonstrations, and so forth. And sometimes, during that period, we worked in collaboration with the textile union.

They were trying to organize the Hanes (workers) in South Carolina, North Carolina, (and) Virginia. So we collaborated and strengthened each other's efforts. And while we were in South Louisiana, we worked with the student commercial workers who were trying to organize mills. We had the contacts, the mill workers. So we actually organized two mills. One of them was with the Teamsters, and one of them was with the Food Commercial Workers' Union. That was my first adventure of doing union organizing.

Then I burned out in Appalachia and

See **Spiritual Solidarity** *page 21*

The Message of Mary Jesus

The suicide of Mary Jesus was a prophetic warning, written in blood and death, that rent hikes and evictions destroy the lives of the poor.

by Lynda Carson

On December 10, 2004, tragedy struck downtown Oakland, when a 33-year-old woman who felt brutalized by Oakland's kangaroo courts plunged to her death from the Oakland Tribune Tower.

Mary Jesus, a longtime Oakland renter, had a message that she wanted to get out to the public at large, and she was willing to sacrifice her own life to do so.

On that fateful day, Mary Jesus stood high above the crowd down below, and gazed upon hundreds of people gathered on the sidewalks beneath the Tribune Tower, as they shouted out to her not to do it. Local attorney Bob Salinas was one of those in the crowd that tried to save her as he frantically yelled to her not to jump.

A moment before she died in a crushing pool of blood on the sidewalk seven stories below, Mary Jesus responded to the crowd by tossing down hundreds of copies of the suicide note that she wanted everyone to read.

All too often in American society, many people feel they are being pushed over the edge by greedy profiteers and the corrupt legal system that caters to their needs. According to Oakland attorney Matthew Siegal, Mary Jesus was one of those people that had been chewed up and spit out by Oakland's brutal eviction system.

"Mary Jesus had evidence that the appeal process was all screwed up," said Siegal. "*The judicial system is biased against tenants and it chewed her up and spit her out. This case was not about rent; it was all about pushing her over the edge.*"

About 50 people came to an Oakland memorial on January 10 for Mary Jesus. "There were many people there that witnessed the suicide and were looking for closure," Siegal said.

Marion Vale of San Francisco was with Mary Jesus during her last evening on earth, and she states that Mary Jesus had taken her own life to bring attention to those that had forced her over the edge.

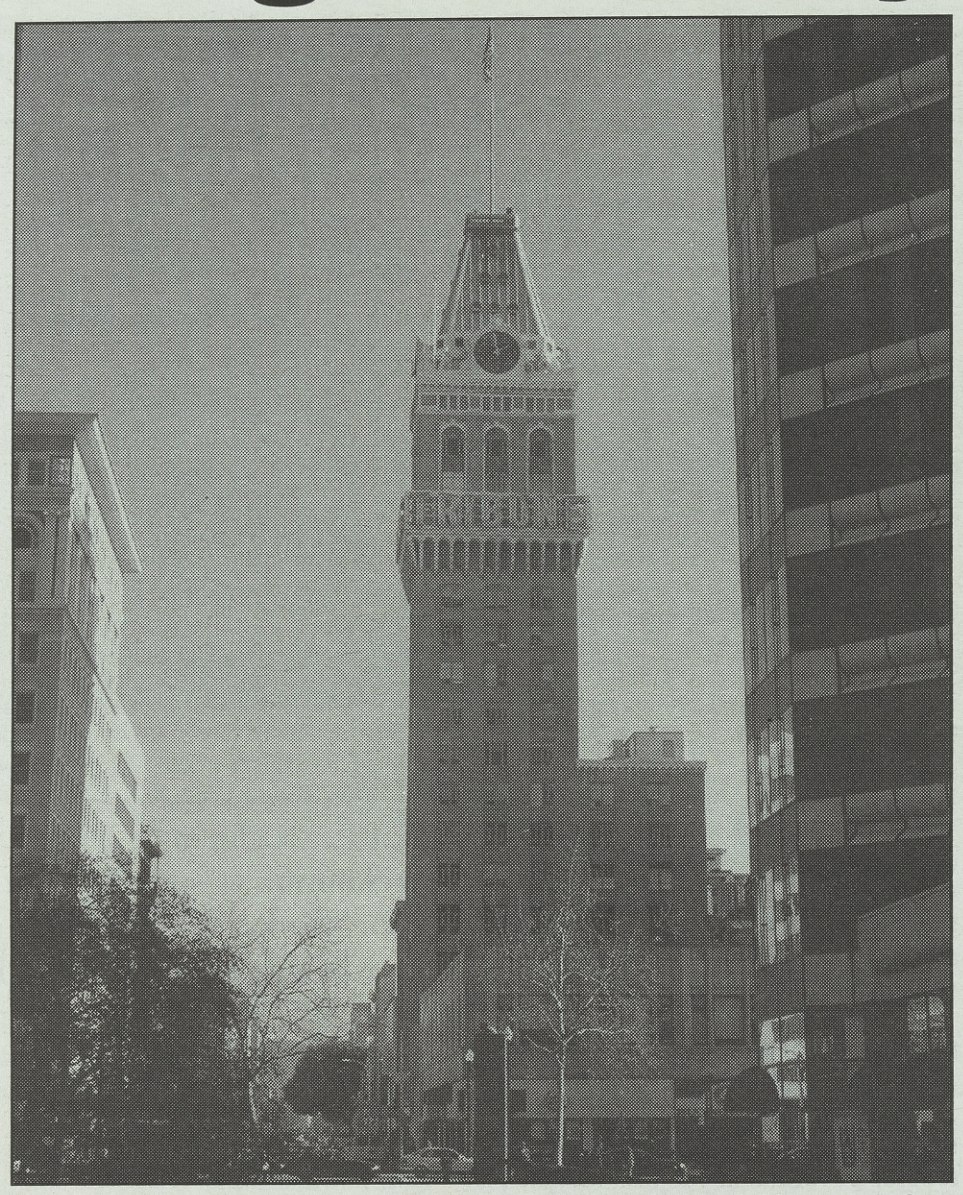
The suicide note mentions four names that Mary Jesus wanted exposed. In the suicide note, Mary Jesus starts by writing: "Mark Roemer, James Lewis and Dean Miller. They are the catalyst!" Alameda County Superior Court Judge Yolanda Northridge was the only other name mentioned in the suicide note of Mary Jesus.

As it turned out, Mark F. Roemer and James L. Lewis were the landlords that owned the apartment building where Mary Jesus resided at 1515 Alice Street in Oakland. Dean Miller was the attorney representing the landlords trying to evict her, and Judge Yolanda Northridge had ordered her eviction from the home she had loved for so many years.

In her last act on earth, Mary Jesus had pointed her finger at these four individuals, who in her mind had apparently held the keys of life or death to the world that she had loved and cherished.

On January 20, 2005, I reached Juanita Moore, the court clerk for Judge Yolanda Northridge, to ask how this tragedy could have come about. Both the clerk and the judge declined to comment on what had occurred in their courtroom and how it led to the death of Mary Jesus.

Also on January 20, I contacted Dean Miller at his residence in Piedmont and he confirmed that not only was he the attorney that went after Mary Jesus, but also that James Lewis and Mark Roemer are some longtime high school friends of his from Piedmont High, many years ago.



Mary Jesus committed suicide from the Tribune Tower, a highly visible media building and one of Oakland's most well-known landmarks. Lydia Gans photo

This trio of friends were the ones that Mary Jesus had named in her suicide note as the "catalyst" that led to her personal tragedy of eviction and suicide.

Mary Jesus had resided for 13 years at the beautiful Dunsmuir Apartments at 1515 Alice Street in downtown Oakland. The 29-unit apartment building, built in 1912, was loaded with beautifully crafted oak trim on the doors and the windows that added a look of elegance and old world charm to the spacious building.

The records show that the Dunsmuir Apartments were bought on January 16, 1998, for $1,320,000 by the landlords of Mary Jesus, listed as the Dunsmuir Apartments Limited Liability CX.

To get to the heart of the message that Mary Jesus had wanted so desperately to give to the public at large, one must first take a look at a press release that she sent out to media outlets on October 27, 2004, less than two months before her death.

Her press release reads as follows:

"This is a newsworthy story that the public would definitely be interested in. The Building I live in, in downtown Oakland, was purchased five years ago. I had already been living here for seven years. I was the manager for a brief period of three years, then fired without cause. They have harassed me consistently since then. Even attempting to evict me in July of 2003, then again in September of 2004. I am very poor, so had to represent myself. It seemed to me that this particular judge (Yolanda Northridge) a Superior Court Judge in the limited jurisdiction, has a tendency to decide against Pro Per litigants. My case NEVER should have gone as far as it went, because the Oakland rental board had already stated that I did not owe the landlords any money. They sought to evict me anyway; the judge allowed their attorney to stifle my evidence. It was all totally illegal!"

The above press release referred to an Oakland rental arbitration board case that Mary Jesus filed against the two owners of the Dunsmuir Apartments, where she was fighting an illegal rent increase. Even though the Oakland rental arbitration board had ruled in her favor as of September 1, 2004, because of an improper notification by the landlord, four weeks later Judge Yolanda Northridge of the Alameda County Superior Court overruled the rent board's decision, and ordered Mary Jesus to pay the landlords $1,018.77 in back rent and to vacate her long-term residence of the past 13 years.

Mary Jesus felt crushed by this cruel, corrupt, heartless system in Oakland, after having done everything possible to defend herself from the rent increase imposed upon her by the greedy landlords.

Any way that one looks at this tragedy, Mary Jesus was overwhelmed by a foursome of professionals wielding great power over her. The four of them were unrelenting in their efforts to run her out of the home she had lived in for 13 years, and the eviction resulted in the violence of her death by pushing her over the edge.

It is no secret that Oakland renters have been up against a brutal eviction-for-profit system for many years. Nor is it a secret that Oakland renters have held several protests these past few years against landlords and judges that act together to evict renters. Indeed, Superior Court Judge Yolanda Northridge is not the only judge in Oakland that has come under the scrutiny of the public during these past few years, nor shall she be the last.

The tragic message of Mary Jesus is a testimony written in blood and death. It cannot escape our attention, nor should it ever be ignored. She sacrificed herself to deliver her last message. The suicide note is her last testimony about a corrupt and brutal system in Oakland controlled by the rich and the powerful. Her suicide note stated:

"Mark Roemer, James Lewis and Dean Miller. They are the catalyst.

"Goodbye cruel world, and all that. Just look up the case, and you'll see why. Just listen to the August 31st 2004 Authenticated recording from rent adjustment. And everyone will say what they always say when something totally preventable wasn't prevented. 'Why didn't anybody do anything.' A couple of people did, but they had no power, and those that did have power were more concerned with technicalities, than justice. Except for Yolanda Northridge, she just does this to people too poor to afford an attorney, and attorneys only take your case if you have money. It's all about money! The love of money is the root of all evil!"

Mary Jesus

P.S. Just cremate me and I have no family.

PROFOUND IMPACT OF HER DEATH

The death of Mary Jesus had a profound impact on the deepest levels of my consciousness.

On December 20, 2004, I received a call from a dear friend, Sue Doyle. Sue works for a number of pro-tenant attorneys in Oakland that I happen to know. Sue told me the unfortunate news about the death of Mary Jesus. I felt stunned.

I had not seen Mary Jesus since the day I was wandering up and down Alice Street in Oakland on a warm Saturday afternoon, using a bullhorn to call tenants out of their sleepy apartments to sign a Just Cause (anti-eviction) petition. I was with Sue Doyle and John Reimann at that moment, and we were part of a group known as the Campaign for Renters Rights.

People streamed out of their apartments that day to join us and sign the petitions we had brought with us. Some of the landlords were screaming at us from their buildings and threatening to call the cops if we did not start moving along.

Sue Doyle had briefly met Mary Jesus that sunny afternoon as we were out collecting signatures for an initiative that rewrote Oakland's rent laws, and gave the renters some protections from unfair evictions and the eviction-for-profit system.

Once upon a time, I had resided on Alice Street in a lovely building for about eight years; and I lived directly across the street from Mary Jesus for much of that period. Of course, that was until some greedy landlord bought the property I resided in and immediately evicted me because I had the cheapest rents in the building. My anger at that bastard knew no bounds. To this day, I still miss the garden that I nourished for so many years in the backyard of the property.

Mary Jesus was a splendid character and was unmistakable in the neighborhood. She generally dressed all in black, with dark shades and long, flowing, dark hair. She seemed rather fierce in her own way. Not the type of person that I would want to get into a feud with.

We got to know one another a bit, and at times we went out for a bite to eat and a chat. At one point, I helped her to plant some new flowers and other plants in front of the building where she resided. She was the resident manager at that time.

In a crazy world that's gone totally mad, Mary Jesus was no crazier than anyone else; and it's a shame that the media pundits insinuated that she was a lunatic who lacked therapy, when they wrote the stories about what had occurred on December 10 at the Tribune Tower.

Neither therapy, nor the leather restraints and Thorazine at John George Psychiatric Pavilion, would have done a thing to keep the profiteers from evicting her from the home she loved, even though she had lived there long enough to be a part owner of the building by now.

Mary Jesus was targeted and the whole weight of the legal system was set in motion to push her over the edge.

Many landlords in Oakland have been

See **Message of Mary Jesus** *page 16*

A Prophetic Warning About Deadly Effects of Eviction

by Terry Messman

"I worry all the time like I never did before.
I ain't got no home in this world anymore."
— Woody Guthrie

Shortly before Christmas, Mary Jesus found that she had no home in this world anymore. Her landlord had raised the rent and then evicted her from the Oakland apartment she had lived in for 13 years. After her release from a brief stay at John George Psychiatric Pavilion, Mary Jesus found herself alone on the stark streets of Oakland, with no home in this world.

Although she had fought a valiant and lonely struggle against the eviction, she found herself homeless at Christmas time, just as the Biblical Mary and Jesus were without a home on the first Christmas.

Being evicted felt like the end of her life to Mary Jesus. As a disabled woman living on General Assistance, she saw nothing ahead but a destitute life on the dead-end streets. She told her friend V. Vale: "If I'm evicted tomorrow, I have no choice but to kill myself. I have no resources, no savings, no money, and nowhere to go."

She took her own life on December 10, 2004. To compound the tragedy, Mary Jesus died in despair because she owed her landlords only $1,018.77. The economic gap between rich and poor in America is rapidly becoming an unbridgeable chasm. There are two entirely separate classes of people: those who could come up with $1,000 in an emergency, and those unable to come up with it if their very life depended on it.

In her suicide note, Mary Jesus quoted a Biblical passage: "The love of money is the root of all evil." She was exactly right. The love of money turned out to be a death sentence for her. Her death stands as a permanent indictment of the greed of landlords and the inequities of a court system biased in favor of those with money and high-priced lawyers.

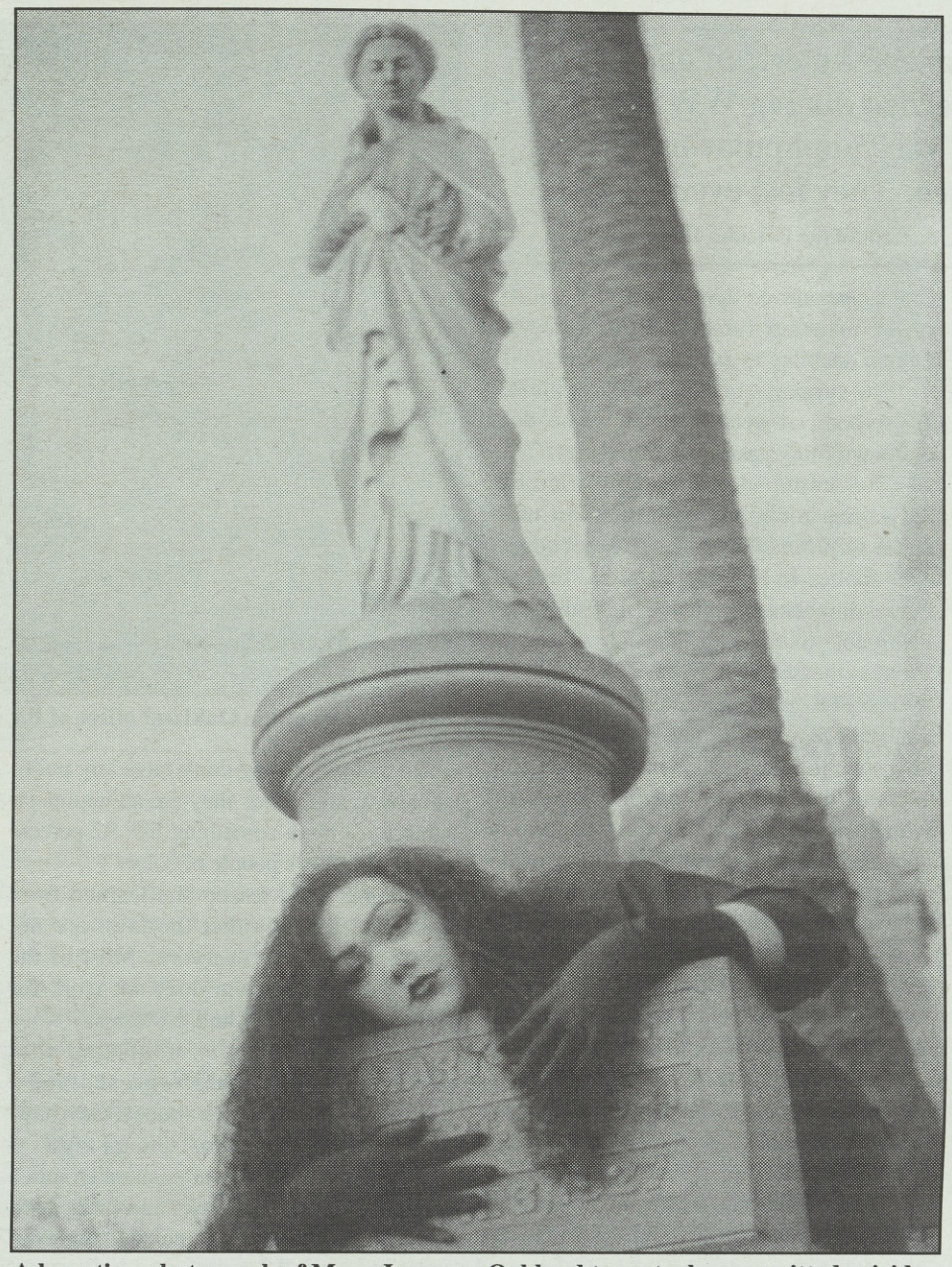
The suicide of Mary Jesus is a prophetic warning of what Mohandas Gandhi once declared: Poverty is the worst form of violence. Her shocking death occurred because she lost her struggle against the same economic forces that have sentenced so many Oakland tenants to desperation, eviction and homelessness.

Low-income tenants in Oakland have been besieged with a wave of rent hikes and evictions over the past several years, and tenant groups have long been warning that unjust evictions and resultant homelessness have grown to life-threatening dimensions. Virtually every housing agency, tenant attorney and homeless service provider in Oakland has warned that rent increases and evictions now amount to a form of "economic cleansing."

But just as Mary Jesus was a fighter in life, she continued her fight against the forces of greed and injustice even with her death. As Mary told V. Vale, "It's better to die on your feet than live on your knees." And as Elizabeth Day wrote to *Street Spirit* about her death, quoting the poet Dylan Thomas: "She chose a very public way to kill herself — she did not go gentle into that good night!"

She deliberately chose to end her life from atop the most prominent tower in Oakland, a newspaper building, a place where the press could scarcely ignore her suffering, the way they largely ignore the suffering of homeless people every day.

She took her suicide note to the top of the mountain, as did the prophets of old, and showered hundreds of copies down to the public gathered below. Then she plunged to her death and gave us all an unforgettable warning about how the avarice of landlords can join with the heartlessness of the court system to extinguish the lives of the poor.



A haunting photograph of Mary Jesus, an Oakland tenant who committed suicide.

Upon hearing of her death, Robert Mills, a longtime homeless activist and a student of Gandhian nonviolence, said that it was a self-immolation like the Buddhist monks who set themselves on fire to protest the Vietnam War. Just like those monks, Mary Jesus died to warn us how heartless this system has become.

She died to tell us that the love of money is the root of all evil, and that profiteering and evictions are lethal.

Her unbearably sad death is made even more haunting because it occurred only two weeks before Christmas, a season when people try to stir themselves to remember the poor among us with sporadic acts of compassion. But Mary Jesus died of homelessness and heartbreak two weeks before those holiday meals for homeless people were held this year.

She died at Christmas time, a holiday for a mother who herself was reduced to homelessness and forced to give birth to a son, also homeless, born in a rude stable.

She died in the season of love and compassion. Mary Jesus died because a ruthless economic system, and the avaricious landlords who benefit from it, have made greed for profits the crowning value of all. Love for money has replaced reverence for human life as the highest value of our society. A country which places its highest value in money will sacrifice the lives of any of us to support landlords in their legalized pursuit of higher profits.

When I first heard of the death of Mary Jesus, I immediately flashed back to the beautifully radical words of the Magnificat uttered by Mary to greet her son's birth: "God has pulled down princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly. The hungry he has filled with good things, the rich sent empty away." (*Luke* 1:52-53)

Those words from the Magnificat have inspired poor people in Latin America with their revolutionary call for justice for the poor. Liberation theologians cite Mary's words to show that God has made a "preferential option for the poor."

But in this world governed by ungodly greed and uncaring landlords and courts rigged for the rich, the legal system has made a "preferential option for the rich."

When landlords calculate their profits, raise their rents and order their evictions without ever calculating the human costs of their actions, I wonder if they are ever reminded of another businessman in *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens.

This seasonal masterpiece is a profound indictment of the unconscionable greed of landlords, moneylenders and evictors. Ebenezer Scrooge, an avaricious businessman, is warned that his greed and exploitation of the poor are sealing his doom, wrapping him in ponderous chains made of the tools in trade of greedy landlords — "cashboxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel."

Many landlords today, if they only had eyes to see, might turn around and see an equally weighty and terrible chain of bad karma that they are forging. For those who place intolerable burdens on the backs of their tenants, and extort every last cent until their renters are penniless, and then evict them, the chains of karma must be a horrible burden, even if unseen.

Asked to make a charitable donation, Scrooge refuses, saying that the homeless must go to prisons and poorhouses. When told that many cannot go there and many others would rather die, he replies, "If they would rather die they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population."

Mary Jesus did precisely that. She could not bear the thought of prolonged homelessness, of shivering through cold December nights in alleys or being hopelessly exiled to shelters and Dickensian poorhouses. So she died and decreased the city's population of low-income renters.

Her death symbolizes the elimination of legions of poor people who have been evicted and have ended up homeless, or have been forced to move out of the city. Her violent death shocks our consciences and brings vividly to mind the fate of all the multitudes of those evicted and now homeless people that are so bitterly complained about by business owners and politicians, and criminalized by the police.

DEAD END STREET

In December 2004, the same month that Mary Jesus committed suicide, the National Low Income Housing Coalition released a report showing that California topped all states in the income needed to afford an apartment. This nationwide survey of rents found that a full-time worker making the federal minimum wage could not afford a one-bedroom apartment in 3,062 of the nation's 3,066 counties!

Mary Jesus, who was permanently disabled and living on G.A., made far less than the minimum wage. Losing her housing in the most expensive state in the nation was a life-threatening blow.

In the song "Dead End Street," Ray Davies, the masterful songwriter for The Kinks, described the gnawing desperation of poor tenants who feel pushed to the very brink of extinction by landlords:

"What are we living for?
Two-room apartment on the second floor.
No money coming in,
Rent collector's knocking, trying to get in.
We are strictly second-class,
We don't understand
Why we should be on dead end street.
People are living on dead end street
I'm gonna die on dead end street."

WEEP NO MORE, MY LADY

"Weep no more, my lady," as Judy Garland once sang so passionately. Mary Jesus has now escaped the pain and greed and injustices of this life. She is beyond tears now. We who still remain can weep for her, but that will never bring her back.

Only one thing would have saved her life: justice. Justice is hard to find in a nation ruled by the power of money and the unquestioned belief that the pursuit of profit is more sacred than the lives of human beings trampled down in the mad rush for more money.

Since homelessness has created so much suffering and so many premature deaths in the Bay Area, why are landlords permitted to engage in a frenzy of rental profiteering that leads directly to the loss of housing? Housing is not some commodity or luxury to be cynically exploited for maximum profit. It is a human necessity, necessary for the preservation of life and health. More than that that, housing is a human right, according to the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights.

A DREAM OF A MEMORIAL

I dream of a memorial for Mary Jesus, a memorial that reminds the public about the suffering of all poor renters. Would a memorial show Mary in her flowing black clothes, her dark, cascading hair, her punk-rock fire and attitude and intelligence? Perhaps it would be a sculpture of her tiny figure atop the Tribune Tower, accompanied with a plaque showing her eviction notice and her last words: "The love of money is the root of all evil!"

But no. The only memorial worthy of Mary's sacrifice is justice. Perhaps, in her name, the landlords could give up their assault on the Just Cause for Eviction law. Perhaps, before they raise the rents to unbearable levels, they could consider the human faces of tenants and their children, their lives and hopes and dreams.

Perhaps they could remember that they hold the lives of renters in their hands when they make their cold calculations about real estate and profits and money.

Perhaps they could simply remember Mary Jesus, in life and in death.

This article first appeared in the February 2005 issue of *Street Spirit.*

Everyone Deserves a Roof Over Their Head

"I am fourth-generation Japanese-American and my family on both sides were interned during WW II. I saw first-hand what happens to a very unpopular minority group that was disenfranchised. They lost everything."

— Anne Omura, executive director of the Eviction Defense Center

by Lydia Gans

Oakland's Eviction Defense Center has been defending low-income tenants facing eviction from their homes since 1996. According to Executive Director Anne Tamiko Omura, the law center has a particular "focus on the elderly, disabled and families with young children."

Street Spirit readers will be familiar with some of the important cases in which EDC attorneys have been instrumental in defending the rights of poor renters.

The Eviction Defense Center was involved in exposing the Richmond court system's unfair treatment of poor people facing eviction. In another landmark case, EDC attorneys prevented the Oakland Housing Authority from wrongfully evicting 19 families from the Lockwood Gardens public housing complex.

Currently, the Eviction Defense Center is helping tenants who live in foreclosed properties fight eviction. Besides these high-profile cases, the EDC handles about 1300 eviction cases each year — Omura estimates that the center has about 100 open cases at any one time!

The Eviction Defense Center does a staggering amount of legal work on behalf of the poorest tenants threatened by eviction. It is an understatement to say that the center operates on a low budget. It has one office manager for four attorneys, with Omura doubling as executive director.

"No support staff," Omura explains. "Everybody answers their own phone, does their own filing, takes care of business."

Their cramped, four-room office has no waiting room and only the most utilitarian furniture. The phrase "low budget" also applies to the staff salaries. Instead, their compensation derives largely from being able to do work that they feel good about at the end of the day.

The EDC is unique among nonprofits in not accepting any public money "that has any strings attached," Omura says. She explains that they help anyone threatened with losing housing, "as long as they're poor, regardless of the strength or the weakness of their case. We help everyone. We believe housing is a human right."

Omura talks about her background and her motivation for getting into this work.

"I am fourth-generation Japanese-American and my family on both sides were interned during WW II," she says.

"I saw first-hand what happens to a very unpopular minority group that was disenfranchised. They lost everything. And I took that experience, because I understand what can happen when people don't have a voice and when they don't have any political power, and when they are an unpopular minority. I think something like 92 percent of our clients are people of color."



Anne Omura at the Oakland office of the Eviction Defense Center. Lydia Gans photo

Another hard lesson she learned from that experience is that the laws are not applied equally to everyone. Most of the time, the legal system does not work for people who are poor and powerless.

"I think it's really important that everybody gets equal representation regardless of how much money they have or the color of their skin," Omura says.

The other EDC attorneys share Omura's outlook, because she seeks and hires dedicated lawyers who are attracted to the work of social justice in the first place.

"What I always look for when I'm hiring here is someone who is a fighter," Omura says, "and somebody who understands that the institution doesn't work for people who are low-income and people of color the same way as it works for everyone else. If you don't have that understanding, you really can't work here because you have to be able to stand up to the system and fight for people and use the system any way you can to benefit your clients."

Lawyers with that kind of understanding are rare — it's not the way they're

See **Eviction Defense Center** *page 9*

Death of Homeless Woman Cries Out for Justice

Sherri Williams was homeless, disabled and in need of medical care. But she died just after being dumped from a Fresno hospital to sleep on a dirt field.

by Al Williams

My wife, Sherri Williams, passed away on December 20, 2007, at 11:51 a.m., while homeless in the city of Fresno. It is my opinion, and the opinion of others concerned, that she died a needless death, at the very young age of 45, because of inadequate health care, especially for homeless people.

This problem of inadequate health care must be fixed now. I don't mean hire some firm for $150,000 or more to study the problem; I mean it's time to GET-ER-DONE, now. We the homeless, the displaced, the poor, are sick and tired of being sick and tired. I, among others, blame local government, starting at the top, with Fresno Mayor Alan Autry, the Fresno City Council, their hired buddies — and don't leave out the Rescue Mission and its director, Larry Arce, and lately the Poverello House.

Let me explain what happened, starting with inadequate health care. Community Hospital receives $20,000,000 a year, if not more from other donations, to provide adequate health care for the homeless, the displaced and the poor. So why are people such as Sherri Williams, who was homeless the last two years of her life, handicapped, confined to a wheelchair and in declining health, refused medical care, which resulted in her death?



Sherri Williams, a disabled homeless woman, was thrown out of a McDonald's and arrested for trying to use the bathroom on July 7, 2007. Then, in December 2007, a hospital dumped Sherri onto the street and she died soon after. Mike Rhodes photo

On Sherri's previous three visits to Community Hospital, a few doctors attempted to get her into surgery. But the big bosses at Community Hospital, who tell doctors what they can and cannot do, and who will live and who will die, refused to grant Sherri the surgery she needed to save her life. What they did was discharge Sherri, with an open wound (a prolapsed rectum), into an open dirt field, with no shelter except a sleeping bag. And yes, she became ill once again, with an infection in her intestine which could have been repaired had the proper surgery been done.

Now Sherri is no longer with us. I ask: Don't doctors take an oath to save lives? And if so, why are there hospital supervisors ordering doctors to go against this oath? Personally, I feel that it is time to replace some of the supervisors, period.

Does the mighty dollar override human life? That is not the oath of a doctor. So, what are we going to do? I say, GET UP, STAND UP FOR YOUR RIGHTS. Let us not have any more needless deaths.

Next on the hit list. The City of Fresno, along with the poverty pimps, such as the Rescue Mission, the Poverello House, Naomi House, and a large portion of the recipients of government funds given to Fresno. Government funding has made homelessness a profit-making business.

We wished Sherri Williams a safe journey on her continued travels, and put together a memorial for her at Roeding Park that was second to none. It goes to show that homeless people are a responsible group and can produce excellent events when necessary.

My point is that it is time for the homeless to take charge of our own destiny. We can and will do it. It's time to fire the poverty pimps. It's time to say to them: "We refuse to let you turn homelessness into a business for personal profit! We refuse to let that happen!"

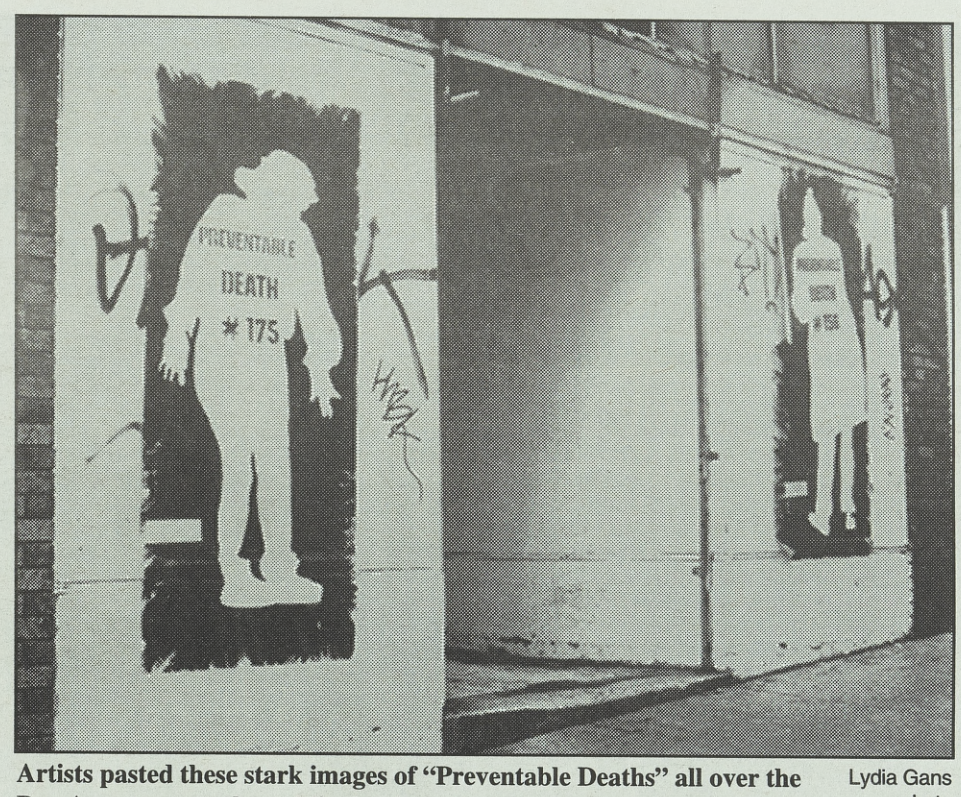
At this time I would like to extend a special Thank You to the following individuals on behalf of Sherri Williams: Pam Whalen, Simone Whalen-Rhodes and Mike Rhodes, Alvin Valeriano, Kelly and Tina B., Jean Chipp, Tom Machado, Rev. Floyd Harris, David Alverez and family, and Food Not Bombs. And from the bottom of our hearts, a very special Thank You to Elizabeth Kucinich, for her attentive, compassionate visit to Sherri on December 1. Thank you so very much!

This article first appeared in the February 2008 issue of *Street Spirit*.

The Murder of a Homeless Woman in Berkeley

Imagine what it would feel like to be a homeless woman trying to sleep on Berkeley's streets after the news of Mary King's murder became public.

by Terry Messman



Artists pasted these stark images of "Preventable Deaths" all over the Bay Area to warn the public that homeless deaths can be prevented. Lydia Gans photo

The brutal assault and murder of a homeless woman in downtown Berkeley brings into sharp focus the terrible dangers faced by women living on the streets.

Homelessness is a dangerous and even life-threatening predicament for everyone who undergoes it. But because of their vulnerability to the ever-present threat of assault, rape and murder, homeless women face a heightened risk of violence and death on the streets.

Mary Katherine King, a 45-year-old woman who had a master's degree in history and had worked as a teacher before becoming homeless, was sleeping near the corner of California Street and University Avenue in Berkeley. While she slept, all alone, four men came up to her after midnight, and two of them kicked her in the head and beat her into unconsciousness.

After the savage, unprovoked assault on February 8, King was taken to Highland Hospital in a coma. She never regained consciousness, and died 12 days later, on February 20, 2005.

Police arrested Jarell Johnson, 18, and have charged him with King's murder. They are still looking for a second assailant.

Mary Katherine King died to make us understand the human costs of allowing thousands of women, men and children to remain homeless in the Bay Area. We complacently allow our fellow human beings — even disabled people, and women with children — to face the hazards of street life, isolated and unprotected.

As a society, we have grown increasingly unconcerned about the terrible dangers of allowing vulnerable people to languish on the streets. In a very real way, our society neglects people to death.

Homeless women are exposed to the dangers of assault and rape 24 hours a day, every day of the year. Picture yourself, alone and without any friends or family at your side, forced to sleep all night on a dark street corner in a crime-ridden area. Picture your fear all night long, waking up startled at every sound on the noisy, restless streets.

Now picture yourself as a homeless woman trying to sleep on those streets on the night after news of Mary Katherine King's murder became public.

In the richest nation on earth, too many people have no alternative but to live a life on the streets that is darkened by harrowing poverty, shortened by danger and disease, and fraught with deadly peril.

Even though homeless women face especially high risks of being assaulted, murdered, robbed or raped, anyone living on the streets can become a casualty.

Last July 18, Dalrus Joseph Brown, 52, was viciously murdered in the middle of the night by a group of young men, ages 15-16, who attacked him while he was sleeping along the railroad tracks in West Oakland. The teenagers repeatedly kicked Brown, shot him with a BB gun, and beat him to death with metal pipes and boards, then tore apart his little shelter.

The murder of Brown was only the latest in a series of violent assaults on homeless people in West Oakland, apparently by groups of men who had singled out their victims for attack simply because they were homeless.

The murders of Mary Katherine King in Berkeley and Dalrus Joseph Brown in Oakland are local examples of a growing wave of violent crimes against homeless people. In California and across the nation, homeless people have been stalked, denounced as bums and drug addicts, then attacked, beaten, set on fire, slashed with knives and shot to death. Many of the attacks are committed by impressionable people who are influenced by the public defamation of homeless people by the media and politicians.

Over the last four years, the National Coalition for the Homeless has carefully documented 280 hate crimes against homeless people, including 131 murders. The crimes have ranged from beheading to drowning to firebombing.

Living on the streets is far more dangerous than most non-homeless people ever realize. The pressing need for society to alleviate and abolish homelessness is made even more urgent when we consider how many homeless people succumb to a premature death. The statistics are shocking. A national survey of homeless deaths found that, although the average life expectancy of U.S. citizens is over 70, the average age of homeless people who died on the streets was in the mid-40s. Mary King died at just about the national average.

Homelessness kills with a hundred different blows. In the Bay Area, people have perished in fires that raced through homeless encampments and have been murdered in brutal street assaults; still others were felled by hypothermia and pneumonia after prolonged exposure to the elements, or succumbed to tuberculosis, AIDS, heart attacks and drug and alcohol abuse, all diseases worsened by the stress of living on the streets.

All these premature deaths are tragedies that could have been prevented by providing decent levels of health care, affordable housing, adequate nutrition, drug and alcohol programs, and simply a safe, sanitary place to sleep at night.

But the shocking rise in hate crimes shows that a new form of intense prejudice against homeless people has become one of the leading threats to their survival. These crimes have risen at a time when politicians, the media and business owners are putting out a constant message that homeless people are unwanted outcasts.

This message, repeated in political campaigns, radio talk shows, TV news and even on billboards that attack the homeless, can have deadly consequences. These messages that scapegoat homeless people are the diametric opposite of the "Continuum of Care" that our society is supposed to be building for poor people.

This widespread prejudice makes up a "Continuum of Contempt" that stretches from the bigoted anti-homeless rants of talk radio, to the anti-homeless laws passed by city officials, all the way to the new wave of hate crimes and murders of people living on the streets.

It is socially acceptable today in mainstream society and in the media to make bigoted remarks against homeless people that could not be made in public against any other minority.

At the same time, homeless people have had their civil rights violated in nearly every major city in the United States. Their very existence has been criminalized and they have been driven out of certain neighborhoods and even entire cities by laws that can only be called de facto segregation ordinances — segregation based on economic class, instead of race.

SEGREGATION AND LYNCHINGS

Where have we seen this very same pattern in American history? African-American citizens were vilified by racists at all levels of society, criminalized by segregation laws, and had their civil rights constantly violated. This prejudice found its most savage expression in the lynchings and murder of innocent people by racist criminals.

Lynching has long been considered one of the most horrifying evils of our national history. But now homeless people are denigrated and denounced, criminalized by a new kind of segregation decree, and even murdered — lynched — by bigoted criminals.

Welcome to the 21st century. It is still safe to utter venomous words of bigotry against the poorest of the poor. It is still permissible for city officials to pass segregation laws aimed at driving out an unwanted minority group. It is still a widespread practice to beat and stab and set on fire the members of a minority group that is widely hated. Lynching is still used to intimidate and terrify this minority.

I have heard horrible words of prejudice uttered against homeless people in university classrooms by affluent students, and on TV news broadcasts by well-groomed anchormen. I have heard homeless people denounced by police officers who are supposed to protect and serve all citizens, and by oh-so-respectable mayors who know that this is one minority it is safe to attack.

When these words of prejudice against the poor are uttered by wealthy talk show hosts and news broadcasters, I hear a form of bigotry that should have been eliminated in this nation long ago. And when anti-homeless laws are passed by highly respected pillars of society, I see blood on their seemingly immaculate hands.

This article first appeared in the April 2005 issue of *Street Spirit.*

Eviction Defense Center

from page 8

taught in law school. "I always say I did not need to go to law school to do what I do here because it takes a different type of skill," Omura says.

Amy Sekany expresses it more bluntly. She was looking for a job and saw a posting for the Eviction Defense Center saying they were looking for attorneys who were "really wanting to work hard for people of color, people of low-income status (and) are willing to start to kick ass. And when I saw that, when I saw that they were looking for somebody to kick ass, I knew the job was for me."

Prior to moving to California, Sekany had practiced in Illinois as a prosecutor and a public defender, and had spent time doing family law. But she wasn't satisfied.

She says, "When I went to law school, believe it or not, it sounds very cliché, I truly went to law school believing that I would graduate and be able to help people." Instead, she found it didn't work that way.

"I spent several years thinking that perhaps I had taken the wrong course of action and perhaps I had gone to law school all for naught, and that I wouldn't be able to help people and practice law in the manner in which I thought it should be practiced."

Brenda Star Adams came to the Eviction Defense Center straight out of law school. While attending law school in Massachusetts, she carried out an internship in a legal services agency that handled eviction cases similar to EDC.

"I really loved that," Adams declares. "I went to law school to help people, and I knew that I would be in some sort of public-interest setting. It was sort of an indulgence for me to go to law school, like you can go to law school and indulge in that as long as you do something good with it."

Because housing is a basic human right, Adams says she sees the work at EDC as "sort of like the public defender of the civil world. Everybody, no matter what they've done, deserves the very best representation if what they stand to lose is the roof over their head and their children's head."

For Chris Beatty, going to law school seemed a natural choice. His father is a lawyer, as are a number of members of his family. He describes "an awareness of social justice and the importance of standing up for it" that also seems to be a tradition in his family.

"I enjoy helping people and using my legal degree in that effort," he says. "I think that legal resources are only available, for the most part, to those with lots of money; and, therefore, it's an honor to help people who don't have the opportunities that people and companies with a lot of money do."

As Amy Sekany says, "I truly believe there's a difference between right and wrong, and I don't always see justice in our system."

It is inspiring and reassuring that there are lawyers in the Eviction Defense Center who are very clear on what is right and are dedicated to making sure that their clients are treated justly under the law.

This article first appeared in the May 2008 issue of *Street Spirit.*

How Berkeley Women Created a Sanctuary for Youth

by Terry Messman



The founders of YEAH! Rev. Sarah Isakson, Adrianne Bank, Natalie Leimkuhler and Sharon Hawkins Leyden. Lydia Gans photo

"It was so dismal to see them coming inside in the winter, damp and coughing. It was really very depressing. It was really hard to keep your spirits up, when it seemed inhuman that society couldn't provide a safe place for them to sleep, a warm, dry place to sleep. It seemed very neglectful." — Natalie Leimkuhler, YEAH!

On a Tuesday evening in late March, the YEAH! shelter on University Avenue in Berkeley was jammed with homeless youth, ages 18 to 25. The night before had been cold and rainy, and once again, dozens of young men and women and their pets had found their way to the only shelter from the storm in all of Berkeley created to serve street youth.

Kim, 19, an outgoing, bright woman adorned with imaginative tattoos, said she was glad to have found her way to this refuge. "It gets really nasty and rainy in Berkeley during the winter," she said. "There's days and days of rain and you end up wearing clothes that keep getting wet, and then you stay wet. It's so much easier to get sick if you're always walking around in the rain all the time and you're wet; and then all your stuff, your sleeping bags and blankets, get wet, too."

An intense, quiet woman named T, 18, said she had been kicked out of her home and had been homeless in Berkeley for three months before finding her way to the YEAH shelter. "I kind of just randomly showed up because there was food," she said. The shelter provides an evening meal, breakfast and a take-away lunch.

T said she learned not to trust people on the street. "It's basically like a jungle out there," she said. "You survive on your own. You don't really get a chance to trust anyone else before they fuck you over."

She had stayed at the YEAH shelter for two months and was grateful to find a safe haven from hard living and bad weather on the streets. "A roof over your head and warmth always helps when it's cold, rainy and crappy outside," she said.

Sanctuary for street youth

For four months in the worst weather of this past winter, homeless youth in Berkeley found a warm and welcoming refuge at the YEAH shelter located in the Lutheran Church of the Cross. This sanctuary for street youth came about because of the tireless dedication and vision of the four founders of YEAH (Youth Emergency Assistance Hostels).

In the winter of 2002, Sharon Hawkins Leyden, Rev. Sarah Isakson, Adrianne Bank and Natalie Leimkuhler came together with a dream to create a shelter for homeless youth in Berkeley. With growing urgency, each of the four foremothers of YEAH had begun to feel that it was intolerable that this especially vulnerable age group had been left to languish alone on the streets for far too many years.

Berkeley's failure to provide shelter and other social services to meet the special needs of homeless youth had become a much-debated issue and a source of shame in the city. San Francisco had long since developed several shelters and supportive services designed for homeless youth, and so had many other cities.

In the East Bay, there were two drop-in daytime centers for homeless youth, but no overnight shelter. Other than that, the only consistent outreach program for youth on the street was a constant series of police sweeps, rousts, citations, fines, arrests and confiscation of their pets.

Sharon Hawkins Leyden, executive director of YEAH, said, "In Berkeley, there is a gap in services. There are minimal services for youth under the age of 18, and there are adult services that the youth in the age range of 18-25 will not access at all. So we have, any given night, depending on who is doing the estimates, 200 kids sleeping on the streets of Berkeley. A lot of people had been talking about doing something, so we decided to see how to fill that gap because nobody else was covering that gap in the whole city."

The founders of YEAH had attended community meetings, but soon grew impatient with talk and inaction. They finally took matters into their own hands and created — seemingly out of nothing but inexhaustible willpower and a few scant resources — a shelter that now provides beds, three daily meals, drug and alcohol counseling, food stamp registration, and a homelike atmosphere geared to make street youth feel welcome.

The four Berkeley women who founded YEAH have moved mountains to create services for homeless youth and to help the very people written off by mainstream society as delinquents and troublemakers.

The equally impressive dedication of their scores of volunteers speaks well of Berkeley's humane values, and shows how widespread the desire to serve the poor remains in this city, despite the supposed ascendancy of "compassion fatigue."

Thrown back on the streets

Yet, on April 1, the only shelter for homeless youth in Berkeley was forced to close its doors and throw everyone back out onto the street, due to lack of funding. The dream of a year-round shelter for youth will remain unfulfilled for now.

For four months, the YEAH shelter provided a life-saving refuge for youth caught out in the storms of winter and the hardships and perils of life on the streets. Those four months were only a brief respite, a short-lived oasis of compassion in a city which had entirely ignored the suffering and privation of a generation of homeless youth, for more than a decade.

If the history of Berkeley's involvement with homeless youth were a book, its efforts to provide shelter for some of the youngest and most endangered members of society would amount to only a few short sentences, surrounded by chapter after chapter of profound neglect.

It took direct action by these four women to overcome years of bureaucratic inertia and to remedy a shocking deficiency in lifeline services for homeless youth — a problem that had been plainly visible to everyone for more than a decade, but that no one else had bothered to address.

Gap in progressive values

YEAH cofounder Adrianne Bank explained how her eyes were first opened to the problem. "When I moved to Berkeley four years ago, I began walking around downtown and Telegraph Avenue," she said. "I would see homeless youth and homeless adults and it just struck me what an incredible gap there was between the progressive ideas of a city like Berkeley, which I absolutely adore, and the beauty of the hills and the Bay and the rest of it, and the grunginess of life on the street. And I thought there's got to be a better way to take care of these people. Everybody I met in the city of Berkeley said that what we need is a nighttime shelter for youth because the youth won't go to adult shelters."

Bank said many young people avoid adult shelters out of fear. "I think they're afraid," she explained. "I think there's a level of violence and a level of pathology at the adult shelters. I also think they're run like prison barracks or Army barracks and they're not very warm and hospitable. I think kids are afraid of getting ripped off and assaulted. I think they're afraid of getting caught up in even more drugs."

Bank felt that others in Berkeley were also concerned about the plight of street youth, and would join in an effort to create a special array of services for them. "It seems like there is a tremendous need on the part of many, many Berkeley folks, just like there was from me, to do something that is constructive about this issue of homelessness," she said. "I'm really committed to making this a community where everyone cares about one another."

Bank shared her concerns with Natalie Leimkuhler, who had been working with homeless youth since 1997 with the Berkeley Chaplaincy to the Homeless. Leimkuhler had been directly inspired by Catholic Worker founder Dorothy Day's "charisma" and had witnessed her work with the poor and homeless; in fact, she and her family had worked for a summer on a Catholic Worker farm with Dorothy Day in the 1960s.

For three years in the late 1990s, Leimkuhler worked with a team of volunteers who provided hot meals three days a week at the Chaplaincy's drop-in center for street kids. During her work at this daytime center, she increasingly saw the need for overnight shelter.

"The need for shelter was so obvious, because the kids would get so sick," Leimkuhler said. "It was so dismal to see them coming inside in the winter, damp and coughing. It was really very depressing. It was really hard to keep your spirits up, when it seemed inhuman that society couldn't provide a safe place for them to sleep, a warm, dry place to sleep. It seemed very neglectful."

About a year ago last November, she and Adrianne Bank began to talk about the real needs of homeless youth, and how little was being done for them. They began meeting with Sharon Leyden and Rev. Sarah Isakson to get YEAH started.

Rev. Isakson graduated from Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley in 2002 and had just become the pastor of the Lutheran Church of the Cross on June 22, 2002. Although new pastors don't often rock the boat in their first year, Rev. Isakson knew that the Lutheran churches in America have made a major commitment to working with poor and marginalized people. Also, her congregation had been involved in Berkeley's rotating shelter years ago. "They had always had a social conscience and acted it out here," she said.

So when Rev. Isakson asked her congregation to take on the backbreaking work of housing a homeless shelter for youth, she was pleased but not surprised

See **YEAH Youth Shelter** *page 20*

An Artist Documents Life on the Streets of Berkeley

Claire Burch's life is an inspiration, and being with her is a joy. All who know her appreciate not only what she has done, but even more, the human being that she is.



Berkeley writer and filmmaker Claire Burch works on editing her digital videos in her home studio. Lydia Gans photo

Her love and compassion for her subjects shows in everything she has done. Claire says, "If I've done anything in my life that has any value, I think it's that I maybe have managed to give more of a voice to the people who I call street survivors."

by Lydia Gans

Claire Burch is a familiar figure around People's Park and Telegraph Avenue. A small person toting a bulky video camera, she has been documenting the people and the happenings of this area since she came to Berkeley from New York 28 years ago. "The first day in People's Park," she says, "I was utterly hooked."

Since then, Burch has shot some 6,000 hours and produced more than three dozen videos of well-known and ordinary people in Berkeley, showing their struggles and successes, joys and pains. Her love and compassion for her subjects shows in everything she has done.

But Claire Burch is also an artist. Her works are more than straight documentaries; they are full of quirky details, superimposed images and overlays of her drawings, and images captured from her own unique point of view.

Creative art in one form or another has always been a part of her life. As a child of six, she was constantly writing or painting. Burch is matter-of-fact in describing herself. "I guess I was one of those little kids who liked to do that kind of thing. And it escalated, it never went away, it got more and more intense."

Her parents wanted her to be something practical, like a lawyer, but they didn't seem to push it. She recalls, "When I was 12 I got a scholarship to a 'life' class. They had models and they had a naked man, which was very exciting. My folks didn't realize. They knew on Saturdays I'd go to this drawing class, but I never told them what was so interesting about it."

Painting remained important for her, "a great big chunk of my life." She and her husband had a small apartment in New York and, she says, she "painted and painted and painted." She had three shows of her artworks and got good reviews, but sold very little.

When the children came, they decided to move to the suburbs "so the kids could have a backyard." But Burch was not happy there, hating the materialism, the "great emphasis on stuff, buying stuff, having more stuff." So she painted.

Her little boy died when he was 14 months old and, she says, "I started painting intensely. It kept me sane."

She describes four miserable years while living in the suburbs when she "went to a shrink, unfortunately a Freudian. He took paintings instead of money, which at the time I thought was great. I thought if I ever wanted to exhibit them I could borrow them back."

After a time, she got disgusted with him and stopped going. "What happened with the paintings was he donated them to the New York psychoanalytic annual auction for a heavy tax deduction and I never saw them again."

When her husband died, Burch returned to New York with her three daughters. They moved into an apartment in Manhattan in a building which had been converted to subsidized housing for writers and artists. It was called Westbeth. It had spacious apartments for 400 families and provided a very stimulating environment.

She mentions some of the famous people who lived there, Merce Cunningham and Diane Arbus. "It was fabulous," she recalls. "One of the best times in my life."

Burch was still painting and also drawing " hundreds and hundreds of contour drawings." She started making movies and even produced a little feature film. "It was terrible but I loved it," she says.

In 1973 she met Mark Weiman, and they have been together ever since. They came and settled in California in 1978.

Once in California, she got seriously into filming. "It gradually replaced drawing. I couldn't stop," she says. Back then, it was Hi-8 film in a movie camera. As that became obsolete, she switched to digital. As all of us who do digital photography know, whether still or video, it's easy and cheap to shoot hours of material — the editing is the hard part. And for Claire Burch, it is the really important part.

She is not interested in keeping up with the latest, increasingly sophisticated technology. She scorns the latest high-definition technology, producing beautiful pictures with little or no content or meaning.

"I'm satisfied if there's a little blurring or some scratches," she says. "Things that would be considered technically poor don't bother me very much. I care more about the actual content. If I've done anything in my life that has any value, I think it's that I maybe have managed to give more of a voice to the people who I call street survivors. That's what I'm really interested in."

A catalogue published by her nonprofit, Art and Education Media, listing 49 videos, illustrates the wide range of her interests. There are broad social and political subjects, including a video of a Jerry Brown "We The People" session exposing the CIA Contra connection, and, still in progress, an extensive documentary on medical marijuana.

The videos use dialogue, music and poetry, and incorporate archival material to celebrate all sorts of people, known and unknown. Three of her videos feature the renowned writer James Baldwin, who was a close friend when Claire and her husband lived in New York. She has painted a number of wonderful portraits of Baldwin which are used as backdrop in the video.

Timothy Leary is featured in a couple videos, with overlays of brilliant psychedelic designs. Another film is a tribute to Rosebud Denovo, who was killed by the police as she was protesting the U.C.'s actions in People's Park. Another documentary tells the short, tragic story of her adopted daughter Laurie, who lived with a psychiatric disorder and never got the help she needed. Laurie's death by an overdose inspired some of Claire's most passionate and compelling poems and a beautifully written book.

In October 2006, the Berkeley Unitarian Fellowship sponsored an evening of Claire Burch's films. The main feature was "Oracle Rising," a colorful, dynamic collage of the glory days of Haight Ashbury in the 1960s, and of Allen Cohen who expressed the spirit of those times in the newspaper he edited, *The San Francisco Oracle.*

The event's organizers also showed excerpts of a few of the films Claire has made of the people on the streets of Berkeley. These are the films that show her heart, that express the compassion and love she feels for the poor, the young, the homeless, the lost. She shows people behaving in sometimes bizarre ways — shouting and crying, flailing their arms or jumping up and down. Although this behavior is not considered socially acceptable in public, people living on the street have no place to express themselves in private; and seeing them as Claire portrays them, somehow makes the viewer feel their pain and not be put off.

Claire can be very funny, too, even while making her points. In a hilarious book, *Charles Darwin in Cyberspace,* Emma Wedgewood has a wacky exchange of letters with her husband Charles Darwin, *wildly hallucinating while tripping on some moldy bread pudding.*

She flips back and forth between 19th century England — where she is demanding child support for a very odd child named Ralph Waldo Business Administration, and accusing her husband of having an affair with Scarlet Charlotte — and 20th century America — where she is trying to get on welfare, and thoroughly confusing her social worker, Dorothy (Beauty) Pageant.

But even with all the silliness, Burch conveys an understanding of critical issues of mental illness and dealing with the welfare system, and even a bit of Charles Darwin's scientific work.

Burch is 81 years old now and dealing with serious medical problems; but with every setback, she comes back more committed to her work. After a number of hospital stays in the past year that resulted in her being equipped with a pacemaker, she was back in People's Park with her camera.

Now her eyesight is deteriorating, and she is learning to cope with encroaching blindness. She still goes out and videotapes, even though she can't see clearly. With the help of a talented assistant, and equipment she has received from the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation that enlarges the images on the tapes, she can edit her material. And though it's a slow process having to use an enlarger, she can read and write.

Burch has just written a book of poetry. Talking about the videotaping and the poetry, she says, "It keeps the demons at bay. I think that's probably why I have to keep doing it."

Claire Burch's life is an inspiration, and being with her is a joy. All who know her appreciate not only what she has done, but even more, the human being that she is.

This article first appeared in the December 2006 issue of *Street Spirit.*

Someone's Daughter, Sister or Mother



Annie Ballance at her home in People's Park in Berkeley on a rainy day.



Faye White was taking the sun in MLK Park in Berkeley when I asked for her photo.

Berkeley Photographer Reveals the Hidden Humanity and Beauty of Homeless Women

Photo essay by Anna Graves

Each one of the women I recently photographed in Berkeley is someone's daughter, someone's sister, or someone's mother. In these photos, you won't see much of the spot called home; you will see someone's daughter, sister or mother living on the sidewalk, under a freeway, or in a park.

I don't tend to show you the toothless smile, or the worst scars — because you might turn away and not see the beauty, the dignity, the humanity. It might scare you; perhaps because you'd have to recognize that it could be you. So many people in this country are just one paycheck or one serious illness away from an eviction — and the sentence to a life of endless wandering.

I was surprised at my own nervousness as I approached the first women on the streets of Berkeley and Oakland. After all, in a past career I was a clinical social worker who worked with homeless men and women in San Francisco's Tenderloin and Mission districts. Even so, I was afraid that I would be met with angry rejection of my suggestion to take their photo, or that they'd strike out in a confused rage. I had forgotten that homeless people are, by and large, very much like the rest of us.

From the beginning, I was struck with the invisibility of the homeless women. As I stood watching a prospective woman to approach, I observed that other people walked around her and looked right through her as if she didn't exist. They didn't respond to the woman at all. It was as if this homeless woman was someone from another planet dropped onto earth in a bizarre science fiction plot, and I was the only one who could see her. I also realized, with a shock, that I had been doing the same as everyone else; I felt ashamed.

Each woman was gracious to me as I spoke to her, offering me a place at her humble abode. Only one turned me down for a photo. Every woman cared how she looked, eagerly peering at the digital reproduction in my camera to approve or disapprove of her hair, the turn of her head, or the appearance of her clothes. They were like people anywhere; they wanted to make a good impression.

There was the agitated woman I came upon just as a city truck was carrying away half of her meager possessions; and the hopeful one who had just thumbed a ride into town from Seattle escaping bad weather and planning for a new, drug-free life. Another was new to town and happy to have scored a hunk of meat from a dumpster; others sat peacefully at long-held vigils watching the sun cross the sky.

Some women were social and wanted to talk, while others seemed so solitary and locked into their own internal thoughts. Yes, some were a little irrational or spoke through a drug- or alcohol-induced haze, but most were clear-headed and made more sense than a lot of people I know.

At least two of the women are pregnant. For a few, their dog is their cherished family. There were those who needed a mother, or a sympathetic ear. One woman kissed me on the cheek in an endearing moment. Though their fragility was often apparent, all the women were clearly survivors in a tough street world that demands patience, endurance and ingenuity.

So, to Annie and Amalia, to Patricia and Brandy and Raven, to Jennifer and Faye and Ms. Mouse, and to all the rest: I am humbled by your generosity, your life-affirming spirit and your willingness to let me enter your lives. I can only hope that I am worthy of your trust.



Sara Hotchkiss was pregnant and sitting on the sidewalk of Telegraph Avenue.



Sitting on a park bench in Berkeley, Patricia Sims was in quiet meditation.





Raven's dog is an important part of her family as she wanders the western U.S.



I found Betty Lee just off Shattuck Avenue in Berkeley as she was walking with her beloved dog which she carefully protects against police harassment.



I came upon Amalia Cooper at her home under freeway 880 in Oakland just as a city truck drove away with most of her possessions. She greeted me cordially anyway.



Jenifer Beckmann discusses the feminization of poverty, standing on Shattuck Avenue with all her possessions.



A homeless woman with the street name of Ms. Mouse stands with her cart in front of the Berkeley library.



Brenda Roberts gave me a friendly greeting when I met her in People's Park in Berkeley.



Susan Love can't straighten her head, but makes a special effort to look up and smile.



In People's Park, Miranda Lee Alger shares affection with her companion.



Berkeley's Visionary Poet of the Streets

Skull & Crosswords
by Julia Vinograd
Zeitgeist Press, 2005

Review by B.N. Duncan



Julia Vinograd's 50th book, *Skull & Crosswords,* depicts the poet with a damaged human skull and a real necklace of teeth from her dead friend Gypsy Catano.

Vinograd often writes about the lost, the misfits, the downtrodden, the disinherited, the abandoned. Living in poverty herself, she's stuck to her guns and kept writing poetry for over 30 years.

Telegraph Avenue's visionary poet Julia Vinograd's book, *Skull & Crosswords,* is her 50th volume of poetry. The front cover displays a photograph of the poet holding a damaged human skull. She has dealt a lot in her poetry with messages of decline, downfall, dying and doom.

Vinograd told me that the book's cover also shows the necklace of Gypsy Catano's teeth, draped along both sides of the poet's photograph. Gypsy made the necklace and gave it to Julia after he lost his teeth.

Over the years, many original individuals have come and gone on Berkeley's Telegraph Avenue scene. Gypsy Catano, long gone, was a street person, and a man of many parts — known for being an activist, rogue, inspirational leader, violent alcoholic, outlaw, goof, and eccentric with a colorful, vital spirit. He died a few years ago while having an epileptic seizure with a chicken bone stuck in his throat.

Over the many years since a colorful street life began flourishing on Telegraph, a lot of the inspired, creative and countercultural dimension to life on the fringe in Berkeley has diminished, although there is still much of interest.

In *Skull & Crosswords,* illustrations by artist Chris Trian emphasize the sense of downfall, lack of direction, spiritual maiming, and inward helplessness that Vinograd's poetry communicates as widespread in our society. Homeless people *are very much a symptom and result of* the society's deficiency.

Street-observer Julia Vinograd often writes about the lost, the misfits, the downtrodden, the disinherited, the abandoned — people who are victims of society and victims of their own selves, and who often can be victimizers of others. Living in poverty herself, she's stuck to her guns and kept writing poetry for well over 30 years.

In reading certain of the poems in *Skull & Crosswords,* I reflect how quite some years back the socially marginal scene on Telegraph had much more special inspiration. There were more people with really interesting personalities and minds; there were more poor and homeless people with purposes and projects beyond just getting by; there was more of a feeling of being together and belonging together. But the scene, being largely parasitic, no doubt bears the seeds of its own destruction.

In *Skull & Crosswords,* the poem, "For A Friend Arrested At The Demonstration," brings up a conflict between the need for serious, thoughtful perception and action, on the one hand; and, on the other, the desire for fun and kicks and having a party and goofing off and being like rebellious children. A major flaw and failure of the 1960s lay in this conflict, and it's still with us. Freedom means the need for sufficient discipline of oneself.

"People On The Street With Nowhere To Go For Thanksgiving" expresses the personal negation that alienated, stranded, down-and-out people can feel on a special holiday. In Vinograd's special way of combining verbal playfulness with realistic observation, we get a "shattered dreams" picture of street people being consumed, having their spirits wasted by privation.

"Street Crazy Playing A Flute" presents a vivid, abysmally sad, though fascinating, portrait of a needy, aged-before-her-time street person who is exhausted in spirit. Vinograd makes the reader pay appreciative attention to a person commonly ignored as much as possible.

"John the Baptist On The Street" expresses profundity in someone stranded on the street in a state of impotent rage and need. He feels that something is owed to him, and he's indignant. Life isn't working out the way he wants; it doesn't seem to be working out for him, period. The poem points to spiritual failure and downfall in our society. Without preaching, Vinograd brings out flaws in people's make-up. The suffering of the bums is real, but so is the lack of character that many of them blatantly display.

The autobiographical poem, "For My 60th Birthday," expresses attrition, disappointment and a sense of being violated and consumed through the years of a long life. Life can be a bummer when you're poor and just one step above living on the street.

"Old Woman" calls attention to a mentally desolate old lady isolated from all other people, someone who seems hopelessly trapped on her own solitary fringe. The reader gets a sense of pointless misery. The old woman might be one of many old people who have lost any point in their lives. One point Vinograd often makes, being a shrewd observer of irony, is the actual pointlessness and waste of many people's lives in our declining, artificial society.

"Anniversary Party At People's Park" conveys a sense of escapism and possible doom. People's Park is still a source of meaning and morale, but people mostly just want to be happy in the moment, not get organized within oneself and organized together to achieve constructive purpose; it's too easy to just enjoy the goodies available at the moment. The charm and funk of the scene as depicted indicates a need for realistic sobriety. For the reader, there's a happy sense of enchantment in the colorful choice of words to designate a quasi-tribal event that still seems halfway vital.

The effects of mass industrialism, corporate capitalism, and madly addictive consumerism have never occurred to this extent in past ages of history. In modern times, people face a new sort of severe challenge to their integrity. A society so much given over to greed and waste produces much waste of mind and spirit.

With "Baglady On A Park Bench," Vinograd really gets into some of what might be going on in the mind of an old, wasted, homeless woman. A stark picture of personal decline, the old baglady has little left for herself except memories; she's a casualty of herself and of a society that doesn't make enough sense.

"Telegraph Avenue After The Chagall Show" brings out the smallness of people that dominates a society for lack of an uplifting vision to inspire people to use the really good parts of their nature. You can go to an exhibit and see the beauty of Chagall's art, but it doesn't solve any problems and miseries in our failing society; it doesn't really relate to us here and now. Vinograd points to some homeless youngsters on the street who may have little to cling to that is spiritually sustaining.

While the subjects of Vinograd's poems are often people on the street who are commonly seen as merely negative or trivial, she has a certain way of painting magic combinations of words in her poems; there's a special verve in her expression that shows us that these people really can prove interesting and significant if we pay attention to them.

The poem, "Sparechangers," in its interesting choice of words, gives heart-awakening life and color to a scene of needy people being ignored by lots of passsers-by as they beg for money on the street.

Over and over again, Vinograd makes valid, moving, arresting subjects of people and incidents that are commonly treated as of no interest or nonexistent.

In the autobiographical poem, "On Receiving A Lifetime Achievement Award From The City Of Berkeley," old-timer Julia Vinograd presents the event as anticlimactic and no real ego-enhancement. Vinograd had publicly received from Berkeley Mayor Tom Bates an honorary proclamation for representing some of "the spirit of Berkeley," and the day of the event, June 5, 2004, was proclaimed "Julia Vinograd Day." This event helps mark her place in history. In her poem, she doesn't sound triumphant, and points out comical, ironic aspects to the situation. There's almost a sense of deflation, as with many of her portrayals of street people.

In summary, *Skull & Crosswords* and Vinograd's body of work in general constitute a testament that includes overlapping categories of entertainment, art for art's sake, documentation, history, psychology, sociology, anthropology, satire, muckraking, biography, and autobiography.

Vinograd has established an impressive legacy, with half a hundred books produced so far about the foibles and frailty of the human race, with street people and homeless people often being prime examples. Vinograd seems to write as though her life depends on it. She certainly rates a place in collections of American literature in the history of this country.

In her long career as a poet on the fringe, she has sometimes written about people and situations as though they're cute and quaint when a lot of the time they obviously aren't that way. It's as though she sometimes doesn't want to see that it can be really bad, really dangerous, out on the street, where dire passions can rage. Vinograd rarely writes about low-class people who commit a lot of the violence on the street. Telegraph Avenue has abundant racial variety, but in her work there's an absence of rendering how people of different races behave and interact, especially when there's violence or conflict between the races.

There have been many interesting homeless and socially marginal people, often of impressive deeds and accomplishments, that she has never written about.

One street person, J.J.D., often homeless, was a man of both warm fellowship and paranoid complications, while having a lot of trouble with alcoholism. He wrote an observant, valuable street-diary, produced his own sort of newspaper, and has done much serious computer work.

V.J., a vehicle dweller, was mild-mannered while having a strong spirit, and did a lot of gardening and construction work in People's Park. He has religious beliefs that involve progress far beyond the material plane, and in a Berkeley election ran for a seat on the City Council.

C.M., another funky street person, homeless a lot of the time, did many moving, far-out, bizarre, dream-world ink drawings, and had lots of tattoos in the style of his drawings made on his body.

A staunch, gritty, idiosyncratic street person with a long homeless history, M.S.S. created art with a special, peculiar combination of whimsy and grimness.

M.M.T., a spunky, witty guy, drew and

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Looking for Work While Struggling to Survive

Van is righteously angry about budget cuts and outsourcing of jobs and a government that just doesn't care. "This administration doesn't give a damn," she says. "They don't care."

Story and photo by Lydia Gans

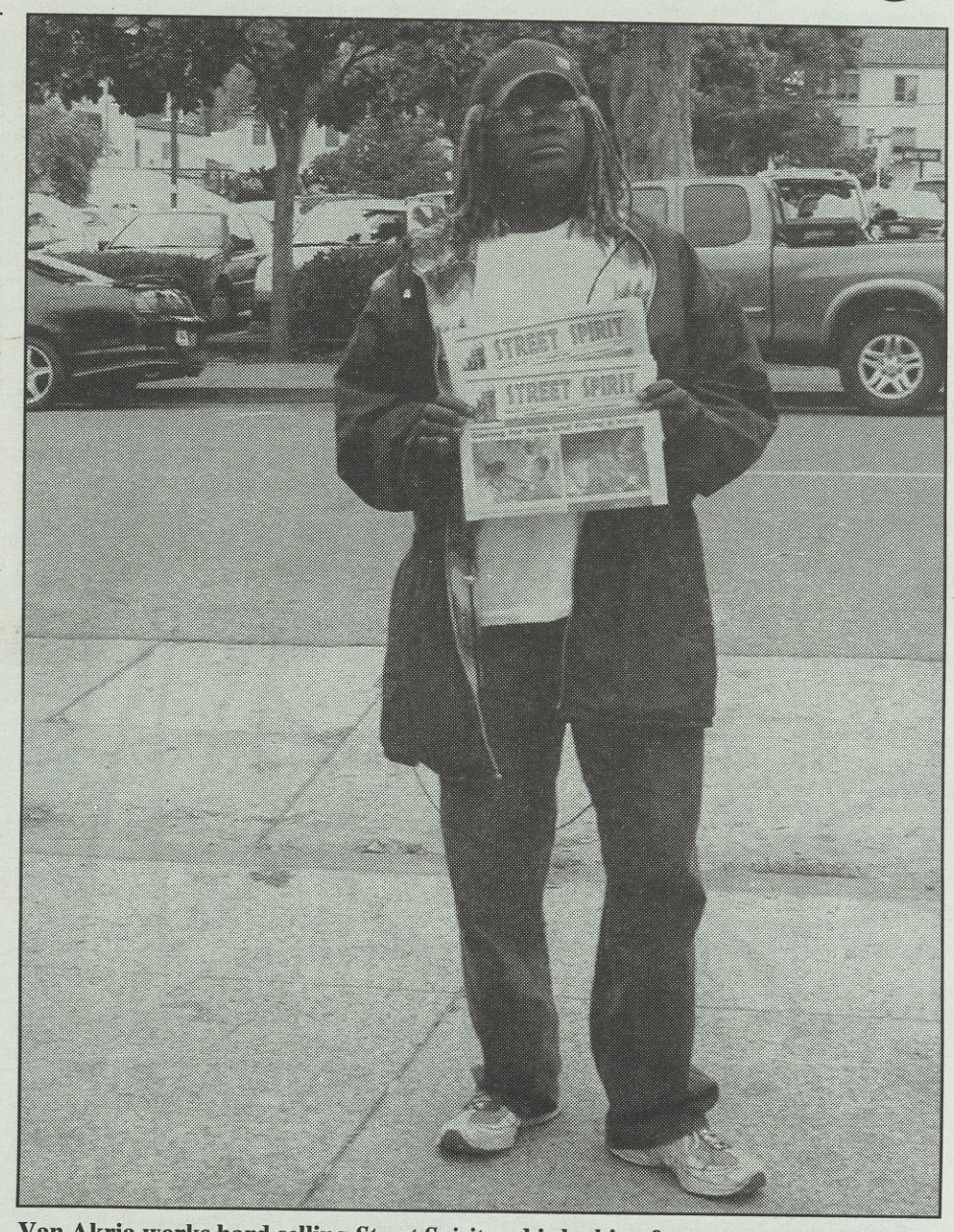
The newspapers carry bold headlines: "Stock prices surge." "The Dow is at a new high," they tell us, reporting an "upbeat economic picture." In large print on the business page, the headline reads, "State gains 6800 jobs in October," followed by a less upbeat message in considerably smaller print: "but unemployment rises."

It's not entirely clear what this really means in terms of the overall economic picture, but it's very clear to people like Van Akria. She has been homeless for a year and two months, with little hope of getting indoors. She has been without a steady job for a year and four months.

Even if she could find reasonably priced housing, coming up with first and last month's rent and deposit seems an almost insurmountable hurdle. It's not that she hasn't been looking. And it's not that she doesn't have any job skills — she was "a printer pressman by trade," she explains, but there are practically no more small printing companies. They've gone out of business, replaced by computers.

She was good at her work, and describes how to recognize good and poor quality printing. She is also an experienced painter, and is strong, energetic, and ready and willing to do any kind of work. Van's last regular job was as a general laborer for the San Francisco Department of Recreation and Parks until she was laid off as a result of budget cuts.

Now, while she looks for regular work, she does odd jobs, selling the *Street Spirit,* helping vendors unload their wares at the flea market and the farmers markets, helping in construction, whatever work she can get. It's enough to eat, to pay for a storage locker, to survive, and maybe get indoors in a hotel room for two or three days a month.



Van Akria works hard selling *Street Spirit* and is looking for a permanent job.

For those of us who have never been homeless, it's hard to imagine what it's like surviving on the street. Van has a regular camp spot with several other people she has known for years. She recalls Maria King, the homeless woman who slept alone on the street and was murdered in Berkeley on February 8, 2005.

Even sleeping with others around, a person has to be alert. Van makes her point with a colorful example: "When you're sleeping on the streets, you got to have your ears pinned to the ground — you can hear a rat piss on cotton at night some times."

Their campsite is in a residential neighborhood where, she says, "people know somebody's sleeping there but they don't want to see you, and you don't want to see them." It certainly looks like a convenient way for folks to deny homelessness without feeling guilty. Van and her friends make sure to keep the spot clean, and they're up and away at 5:30 in the morning.

Van is 48 years old. She was born in New York, then came out here with her parents when she was 12. She still has relatives in Brooklyn who she recently went back to visit for the first time in 30 years.

We talk about living in New York and I tell Van that I think I would like to live there if I had money; but she doesn't agree. "If I had a lot of money, I'd live in Canada right now," she declares.

She is sensitive about how the public looks at homeless people, how they expect all homeless people to look dirty and unkempt; those looks are supposed to make homeless people feel inferior and stigmatized by their position.

What does it mean to "look homeless" these days, she asks. "There are people out here got jobs (yet) they sleep on the street. They don't look like they're homeless. They can go to work every day, they can buy a bus pass, but they can't afford the rent to stay somewhere."

Van stands tall and proud like any confident and capable member of the community, defying anybody to say she looks like a homeless person. "I go to MASC, take a shower, brush my teeth, change my clothes every day." She is trying to get a regular job "so I can stay inside," while working just to survive from day to day.

Struggling to survive, Van is righteously angry about budget cuts and outsourcing of jobs and a government that just doesn't care. "This administration doesn't give a damn," Van says. "They don't care. Why are our jobs going across the water? We were American workers, now we're American consumers. And how are we gonna make money to be a consumer (when) we ain't got no jobs here? What's wrong with this picture?"

She is clear on the problems facing the country, on the need for change, and on the need for political action; but she doesn't have the time or energy to participate. "I'm trying to get a job and get off the streets. I got to do what I got to do," which is "get a permanent job and get back inside."

She's not optimistic, and only sees things getting worse. "Right now, there's going to be more people out here besides me — a lot more people, and families — sleeping on the street, in doorways (because of) the Bush administration," Van says. "And people are going to say, 'Where are they coming from?' What do you mean *where they coming from? You voted for that man to get in, well vote his ass out!*"

She is convinced that more and more people are beginning to recognize what is happening. She notes that the public is not so ready to stereotype the homeless anymore. "When they see homeless people on the street right now, people say, 'Oh my God, that could be me next month.'" If it could happen to Van Akria, who is strong and competent and ready to work, it certainly looks like it can happen to anybody.

This article first appeared in the January 2006 issue of *Street Spirit.*

JOHN THE BAPTIST ON THE STREET

by Julia Vinograd

Skinny, tattered jacket, tangled wild beard,
sharp knees on the sidewalk
outside a sandwich and salad shop;
a John the Baptist woodcut.
Someone had given him a plastic container
of salad-to-go instead of spare change.
He howled, head thrown back,
dirty fingers clawing limp cringing lettuce
till even the celery whimpered and bled.
His rage worked magic on mayonnaise
and carrot peelings.
They became the torn fur of a small desert
animal that didn't get away.
He snarled, scattering bones in all directions.
John the Baptist turns wherever he is into desert.
He preaches to stones, lizards and cactus
in their own language.
When the cops came on a noise complaint
he didn't fight them the way he fought his salad.
He didn't answer their questions, only waited.
Either they'd go away or take him away.
Either way they weren't real to him.
Messiahs come and go, like the tide, in and out
but the Baptist's still blocking the sidewalk,
raging, radiant and waiting.

Visionary Poet

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self-published, while he was homeless, a series of ten comic books about the life of being down and out.

A female street person who was homeless for many years, K.M.N., a strangely waif-like person who seemed out of place in this corrupt, fallen world, produced amazing ink drawings that reflected a rough, raw, rugged, ragged edge of life. Another street person, H.M., is a proud urban outdoorsman, and an intelligent, articulate, dissident-styled, conspicuous eccentric. He has received considerable credit as a philosopher with saving vision, and has kept getting disciples.

M.D.G.F., a homeless woman, and a quirky, anguished, verbal person, kept an intensely confessional street diary. A muscular man of the street, R., has long been conspicuous for his ear-shattering vocalizations and gymnastic stunts in public.

W.B.W, a wiry rebel who used to be a regular Telegraph Avenue fixture with his guitar and his public declaiming, produced a lot of one-of-a-kind Xeroxed publications with offbeat poetry and prose.

D.M.M, a sharp-minded tough guy, was once homeless and has had a lot of trouble with the bottle. He has shown a strong duality whereby he can be brazenly violent (even once biting on someone's leg like a bulldog would); while, on the other hand, he's done constructive campaign work for homeless civil rights, and promoted public entertainment in the form of music shows in People's Park.

A brash extravert of the street, M. wrote and self-published a novel with the adventures of a radical, hot-blooded hero who seeks to save the world.

These are examples of people who have distinguished themselves in the Telegraph Avenue fringe-scene who Julia Vinograd hasn't written about.

But, in all fairness, it must be acknowledged that an artist's particular vision will enable him or her to say some things, but will exclude some other things. The way that Vinograd's poetry voices a special combination of the playful and the grim relates closely to how a lot of the socially marginal street life of Berkeley's Telegraph Avenue does contain a combination of the playful and the grim.

Through her observations of failure and funk in a specific microcosm, she reflects on failure in society at large. She stands out as a luminary and shines light on the actual meanings and significance of numerous sights and incidents that are momentarily noticed on the street, but are promptly forgotten by many.

Julia Vinograd stands among the writers who deliver a penetrating exposé of the times. With the decline in the quality of life in our times, politics seems to go nowhere. Writers and artists seem unable to provide the positive, uplifting vision that is needed.

We stand in drastic need of spiritual leaders of the stature of Jesus and Buddha. But do a lot of people even want to listen to serious spiritual guides in a world that's increasingly like a combination of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984?*

This article first appeared in the October 2005 issue of *Street Spirit.*

Memorial to Mary Who Died on the Street

Workers at the Lakeshore Post Office would talk with Mary, and give her money for food. "We have Mary in our hearts, in our prayers," Deborah Young said.

by Lydia Gans



Art by Tiffany Sankary

She died alone, on the cold concrete in the back of Albertson's parking lot in Oakland's Lakeshore district. She had been homeless for more years than anybody could remember. Her name was Mary and she was 65 or 66 years old; but beyond that, nobody knew much about her, not her last name, nor where she was from, nor if she had family somewhere.

When Mary died, no relatives turned up to mourn her. Said local resident and activist Ken Katz, "She led an anonymous life and died an anonymous death."

Yet, in the words of Oakland City Councilmember Desley Brooks, "She really did have a family. She was part of something and I think she knew that."

Brooks was one of two dozen people who gathered at Lakeshore Baptist Church to hold a memorial for Mary. She reflected the feelings of many of the people gathered there when she said, "Mary had become part of my life."

For 10 years — or maybe 15 or even more, nobody is sure — Mary was seen around the Grand Avenue/Lakeshore neighborhood, on the street or in the coffee shops and eating places. People there got to know her, and they would sit and talk with her, and buy her food. Mary appreciated it, but she rebuffed every attempt to get her moved indoors.

Kathy McCarthy is a case worker at St. Mary's Center in Oakland which provides services and shelter for homeless and low-income seniors. She does outreach in the community and had tried to get housing and medical care for Mary. Mary was eligible for senior services and her health was deteriorating, but she always refused these attempts to help her.

"She needed services desperately," McCarthy said, "but the system couldn't deliver them and she died."

Pastor Jim Hopkins opened the memorial with a reading from the scriptures, something from the Old Testament and something from the New. Someone else later commented on the appropriateness of the readings, since nobody knew whether Mary was a Christian or Jew.

Several people came forward to talk about their memories of her. Deborah Young works in the Lakeshore Post Office. She recalled how Mary "used to hang around near the post office... next to a co-worker's car. I guess she felt some love." The postal workers would stop to talk with her, and give her money for food. "We have Mary in our hearts, in our prayers," Young said.

Lisa (she didn't give her last name) has a cleaning business on Lakeshore. She spoke of giving Mary food and asking her if she would go into a nursing home if it could be arranged. Mary was having some health problems and she seemed to agree.

So Lisa connected with a social worker she knows and put together a plan — but by the time she got it all together, Mary was dead. But Lisa was inspired and plans to start a project to get seniors off the street. "Mary is my inspiration and I will not forget her," she declared.

An elderly man got up and told a story. It wasn't about Mary, yet it seemed appropriate. He told of his grandparents who had a farm. One day a hobo came to the door. His grandmother invited him into the parlor, gave him food and talked with him for a while. After he left, the old gentlemen recalled, he and his brother confronted their grandmother, "Grandma, you won't let us in the front parlor." She answered him, "You never know who God is."

G.G. Greenhouse, director of Alameda County Health Care for the Homeless since 1988, recalled Mary from her early days on the job. "She would have her good days and her bad days" when she resisted efforts to move her into housing. Greenhouse described the huge problem of homelessness that people try to ignore. "When we take out our mobile van (with) case managers to Berkeley, Oakland, San Leandro, Hayward, Fremont, Livermore — places that people swore there are no homeless people — and yet every time, they find us and line up."

And, like Mary, there are countless homeless people who die unknown every year. Greenhouse urged the mourners, "If anyone wants to do something as a tribute to Mary, go to the City Council and tell them redevelopment money is not just for people who can afford a $300,000 condo; there is another level that needs to be housed." She ended by observing that "now Mary did find a home."

It is sad to think of Mary's lonely death. Ken Katz observed that "it was amazing that she survived." And it was amazing that she was not bitter, but remained the sweet women everyone liked and cared about.

Mary was a small woman. Someone described her as "a very gentle person." She "kept herself amazingly clean," according to Ken Katz, who told of seeing her "doing her morning bath at the Splash Pad park.... She washed her feet and her socks and hung them on the wall to dry."

Though she was dependent on people to give her clothes, Mary was particular about what she took and managed to look well dressed, even fashionable. Brooks said that the glasses she wore were "not the big old frames that old people usually wear."

Whatever her issues may have been, whatever fears prevented her from going into some sort of shelter, Katz observed that "it was amazing that she survived." And it was amazing that she was not bitter, but remained the sweet women who everyone liked and cared about.

It is sad to think of Mary's lonely death. And sad to think of what she might have contributed to society had she not had to put all her efforts into just surviving.

This article first appeared in the September 2006 issue of *Street Spirit*.

Care

by Joan Clair

It's hard to find any place
in the world that wants you.
Maybe that's why when I see
people pushing shopping carts
on the streets,
injured birds,
neglected animals,
and children crying
to miles of indifference,
I care.

Message of Mary Jesus

from page 6

cruel enough in their pursuit of profits to make many a soul in Oakland consider suicide as an escape from their greedy grasp. Believe it. I get calls and e-mails from desperate tenants all the time, and at times suicide seems like an option in a world where the rents are so high that people become convinced that they will never come up with the cash needed to move into some other slumlord's rat-infested hellhole.

Her landlords are lucky that Mary Jesus did not do to them what she had done to herself. That would have given the *Tribune* and the *Chronicle* something to write about; but that was not what her message was all about. Instead, Mary Jesus took her own life to expose the legal system that exists here in Oakland, and the greedy landlords that use the system to push their renters over the edge.

On October 18, 2004, I received an e-mail from V. Vale of Re/Search Publications, asking for help to stop Mary Jesus's eviction. I immediately responded, and sent off a good-sized list of attorneys' names and phone numbers, including the Eviction Defense Center. I gave instructions for Mary Jesus to take action as soon as possible to stop the eviction and to contact an attorney immediately for assistance.

I was happy to do what little I could to stop the profiteers from dumping her out onto the cold-hearted streets of Oakland. I live for moments like this.

Indeed, when V. Vale contacted me, he had no idea that I actually knew Mary Jesus, and was totally surprised that I knew a few things about her. I sent him a list of attorneys and instructions which he handed over to Mary Jesus. Vale also called some of the attorneys to see if he could line one of them up to help Mary Jesus in her time of need.

It felt good to hear back from Vale, and to receive a thank you for being there to help. I thought that I had done my part to help, and set my mind to other tasks. I did not see, I could not see, the dark future that was looming just ahead.

I cannot get the picture out of my head of Mary Jesus standing there high above the street, just before she plunged to her death. I keep thinking of what she may have been feeling those last few moments and days of her life. I keep wondering how her short life of 33 years finally ended so tragically atop the Tribune Tower.

I wish I could have done more to help keep a roof over her head and preserve her right to remain in her much-loved home.

It was somewhat of a comfort to learn that Mary Jesus spent the last evening of her life with Vale and his wife Marion in San Francisco. These two had tried their best to help her fight the eviction proceedings that ended up pushing her over the edge. They had offered her shelter from the storm when she needed it the most.

I can't help but cry when I think of the last few moments of Mary Jesus, and what she must have been going through as she gazed upon the crowd of 200 onlookers that witnessed her death. I can't help but think about her final hours as she made copies of her suicide note and the message she wanted the people to read.

The message of Mary Jesus is splattered with the blood of her ultimate sacrifice — a sacrifice that ensured her voice would be heard loud and clear.

She is pointing her finger at the landlords, the judges and the legal system that pushed her over the edge. I call for an immediate and thorough investigation into the cases that Mary Jesus refers to in her message to the people.

It will be up to each and every one of us to take the message of Mary Jesus to heart, and to do whatever is necessary to make certain that the injustices that pushed her over the edge will be exposed and held accountable.

May Mary Jesus rest in peace, and may her troubled soul find some happiness in the next dimension of reality, far removed from the greedy landlords and war criminals that have wreaked havoc on the American people and the world at large.

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Car Wreck Plunges a Grandmother into Homelessness

What I have gone through should not happen to anyone. Poverty should not exist. It must not exist. Food, housing and clothing are rights, not privileges.

by Rosie Kreidler



Rosie Kreidler survived a car crash only to face homelessness. Tom Lowe photo

In 2002, in New Mexico on Interstate 40, Melvin, my grandson, and I ran into a thick fog with zero visibility. Then a huge Fed-Ex 18-wheeler transport truck ran into the back of us, rolling us over several times. Bones broken, glass cutting us up, and the uncontrollable fear that life would be ending here and now were terrifying beyond comprehension.

Somehow we were located by a passing truck and transported to the nearest hospital. We were terrified and bleeding, and my grandson, out of fear, had urinated over his clothing. Melvin's face was covered in blood and I couldn't move my body. The most terrifying part was that when the truck hit, it sounded like a bomb had been dropped. I never heard anything sound so loud and frightful in my life.

ONCE A NURSE, NOW HOMELESS

Prior to the accident, I worked as a licensed nurse. As a matter of fact, I worked the day before the accident without ever anticipating this. Released from the hospital with multiple injuries and severe pain, I did not know what I was to do next. I had no car: everything valuable, both inside and outside, was destroyed.

My brother heard of this, and transported us back to my state of residence, California, where I was to receive treatment. The insurance companies did not pay for the hospital stay and moved us out to find other means of treatment.

I ended up sleeping in my car after several months of attempting to get adequate care. The pain and broken bones limited my search for help. Eventually someone saw me in my auto, and suggested I go to St. Mary's Senior Center at 635 22nd Street in Oakland. There I could receive food and direction. I stayed at the shelter on a cot which was terrible for my back and neck, but that was it. And thank God I wasn't forced to live in my car, cold and exposed to the elements.

IS THIS HOW MY LIFE WILL END?

Where am I going from here? Is this the way my life will end? Looking for food, housing, and living with this constant pain? These questions scared me. I couldn't manage my activities of daily living.

Every agency had a delay mechanism installed in its policy. I had to wait months to get help and then papers from these agencies were lost, or as one eligibility worker put it: "I have vacation coming and retraining, so I don't know when I will have your need for food stamps, emergency housing vouchers, or MediCal finished." When she returned from vacation, she simply closed my case.

The depression had become so severe that I didn't want to continue living. I had some dignity with my work, and the ability to take care of myself. This was constantly attacked; and eventually, I felt helpless and hopeless and suicidal. I had worked all my life, and had taken care of my aging parents and raised a family, and now there was no one for me. The state budget was cutting back its services to the poor, and I was poor. This made me feel that help WAS NOT ON THE WAY!

ST. MARY'S SAVED MY LIFE

At St. Mary's Center, I received hands-on help from my case manager, Sister Mary Nolan, which literally kept me from killing myself. She offered alternatives and encouragement to fight back for my meager rights to life. Her direction was God-sent, and without it, I know I would not be alive today.

St. Mary's Center is a senior center and, as a senior, I have noticed that people overlook you. When people do manage to see your existence, they express it in bothersome, disposable ways, saying that "you must have brought this on yourself." What I have learned is that this is not true.

I learned that any one of us could become homeless and stuck in poverty without our input or consent. My tunnel of pain became a way of death. I learned that hopelessness reinforces uncontrolled stress which eventually makes you mentally ill. My dignity left and I am now a victim.

Life is a visit and not a stay. But when you are thrust into a world without housing, food, clothing, and love, there is no living. You have begun your journey, regardless of pace, toward death. All of my life I have given to my country, the United States of America. I have been in many countries as a national and international athlete. I have competed for the U.S. in the Olympics. I have seen poverty around the world, but I never thought I would be sitting here asking each country to reverse this tragic way of existence.

The children are our future, and as a senior, I am the past. But what I feel and have gone through should not happen to anyone. Each country can and should reverse poverty. Poverty should not exist. It must not exist. Housing, food, and clothing are a right, and not privileges.

Hope is part of human existence and should never be taken away from anyone. Loving in all its varied degrees belongs to each of us, to be shared and given as our almighty God has ordained.

The question is, are profits more important than food? Are having books, yet not being able to read, the answer to a child's future? When we realize that any one of us can become disabled, do we turn our heads and not see what that disabled individual is going through? Do we help or do we hurt those in need?

We are human beings, and all that life gives is the opportunity to enjoy its many wonders, to protect our planet, to save our environment, to not place profits before people. I want my heart to stop crying for the many that I now share pain with, both mentally and spiritually. Help me to help them.

Support organizations like St. Mary's Center for seniors by whatever you can do. This effort might just keep someone alive. I implore everyone to make the eradication of poverty and homelessness a top priority and help me end this indignation forever. I know this is possible and I offer my help along with yours.

This article first appeared in the April 2006 issue of *Street Spirit.*

The Journey of Charlotte Tall Mountain

Charlotte Tall Mountain
July 1, 1941 to May 6, 2006

Spiritual values in relation to nature lived in her heart. She was a tall mountain indeed.

by Joan Clair

Charlotte Tall Mountain, an artist and poet who contributed several of her poems to *Street Spirit,* passed on after a long struggle with cancer, on May 6, 2006. She would have been 65 years old in July of this year. She is survived by a daughter, two sisters and a brother.

Of an Iroquois Native American heritage, that blood not only flowed through her veins, but the spiritual values in relation to nature lived in her heart.

In her poem, "Recovery Uncertain," published in the January 2005 *Street Spirit* (and reprinted on page 16 of this issue), she bemoans the materialism of our prevailing society and the desecration of nature. As an ensouled being still in touch with her spirit, she deeply grieves the separation she feels from others of her kind, and the entire natural world of which she is a part, due to our society's stupidity, greed and ignorance.

"Recovery Uncertain" is a magnificent poem, a cry of the heart for modern times, comparable to William Wordsworth's sonnet of the 19th century, "The World Is Too Much With Us," which has a similar theme. In the poem, she laments the loss of the oral traditions of telling stories, the objectifying and de-souling of trees to lumber and animals to meat; the reduction of beauty to a bottle of perfume and peace to a pill.

Her most widely circulated poem, "For Love of the World," published in *Street Spirit,* and also as a card by the Syracuse Cultural Workers (SCW), reached a wide audience through the gift shop of the United Nations and elsewhere. It was also carried locally in the Bay Area by stores such as Gathering Tribes.

Karen Kerney of SCW said it was a very popular card. She said that Charlotte was a "cultural worker" aligned with SCW's objectives to "achieve social and environmental justice, liberation, equality and peace," and that she provided many inspiring ideas to SCW over the years.

Charlotte Tall Mountain was an artist who had many shows in the Bay Area. Her art was reproduced, among other places, in the We'Moon calendar and datebook for 2005. Pomegranate Press published a calendar using only her artwork.

One of my favorite art works by Charlotte Tall Mountain is "Buffalo," which she allowed me to photograph shortly before she passed on. The beautiful colors, typical of Charlotte's work, and the lightness of the expression communicate joy in creation and in the intrepid buffalo figures moving in and out of manifestation.

Never in denial about the pain she suffered in her life, whether physical or emotional, Charlotte, with abundant humor and ready grace, enabled others to see things as they are. She was a "server," always encouraging others to grow and let their gifts shine. She was a tall mountain indeed.

This article first appeared in the June 2006 issue of *Street Spirit.*

ACCEPTANCE

by Charlotte Tall Mountain

In nature,
I am neither rich nor poor,
Neither old or young
Modern or old-fashioned
My vestments, appropriate
to the heat or cool
Are indifferent to her
She doesn't care if I am
employed or idle
Whether I've paid my bills on time
Or if I will be the recipient
of a grand prize
I cannot impress her with my wit
But I feel she understands my pain
She offers me her bounty whether
I have earned her grace or not
So great is her wisdom
So huge her heart.

For Love of the World

by Charlotte Tall Mountain

For the love of a tree,
she went out on a limb.

For the love of the sea,
she rocked the boat.

For the love of the earth,
she dug deeper.

For the love of community,
she mended fences.

For the love of the stars,
she let her light shine.

For the love of spirit,
she nurtured her soul.

For the love of a good time,
she sowed seeds of happiness.

For the love of the Goddess,
she drew down the moon.

For the love of nature,
she made compost.

For the love of a good meal,
she gave thanks.

For the love of family,
she reconciled differences.

For the love of creativity,
she entertained new possibilities.

For the love of her enemies,
she suspended judgment.

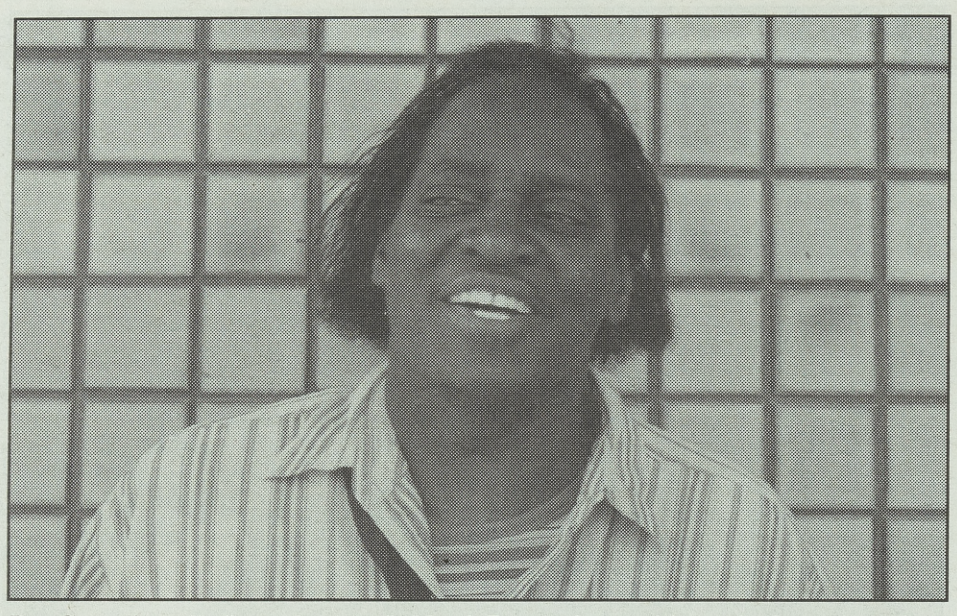
For the love of herself,
she acknowledged her worth.

And the world was richer for her.

Dee's Story: The Stigma of Being Homeless

"Once my car was towed, I wasn't living out of that any more. I really was out of luck. It's hard being homeless, it really is hard. Some people think it's a choice."

by Lydia Gans



Dee Cornelius sells *Street Spirit* in Oakland. Despite her positive attitude, she constantly has to deal with society's prejudice against the homeless. Lydia Gans photo

Dannette Cornelius sells the *Street Spirit* in front of Ace Hardware store on Grand Avenue in Oakland. She has been homeless since last November, though this is not her first bout of homelessness. She is 48 years old and has numerous health problems, but she manages to stay upbeat.

As we stand and talk, she greets familiar passers-by by name, including their children and even their dogs; and, in turn, everyone calls her Dee. She is on good terms with the policemen on the beat. They are Piedmont police, she explains. The Oakland boundary is just down the street and the Oakland police, she says, routinely harass *Street Spirit* vendors.

The employees of the hardware store come out and chat with her. Last Christmas, the store owner surprised Dee with a gift of $50. She has been selling the *Street Spirit* here for a year and a half, and encourages people not just to support her by buying it, but to seriously read it.

Dee was homeless for the first time back in 1997. She had been working at various temp jobs and acquired a variety of skills, but then she had a stroke. "Once I had that stroke, that kind of threw me for a loop," she explains.

Dee describes how becoming homeless changed her life. "What a lot of people don't realize is that homelessness is getting a stigma. Everybody thinks that they can't get there. You just don't know. Some people are one or two paychecks away. When illness happens, especially if you (don't have) medical coverage, the rent man, your landlord, does not want to hear about (why) you can't pay rent."

Dee recovered from the stroke and eventually found another job; but adversity struck again. She developed more serious health problems and was homeless and jobless on and off for varying periods.

She went to stay with her mother who had been living in a downtown Berkeley apartment for 15 years. She moved back in and lived there for a year and a half; and then her mother died. The landlord promptly raised the rent from $665 a month to $1340, far more than Dee could afford.

She protested the exorbitant rent hike by going to court, but the legal system let her down. Because the mother was the tenant of record, her death enabled the landlord to double the rent, even though Dee still was living in the apartment. Dee explains, "Even though I might have lived there, she was the primary tenant so it didn't matter whether I was there or not. Which I think is wrong, and it's rotten."

On November 30, 2004, Dee became homeless once again.

Once you are homeless, it becomes nearly impossible to live a normal life. Just getting enough sleep is a struggle. For Dee, it has meant "sleeping here, sleeping there." Getting into a shelter is hard given the shortage of shelter beds, and doesn't really offer much relief.

"The shelters are more or less geared for 30-day stays," she says. "Everybody's got their rules and regulations. You have to be out by 7:00 in the morning in most of them. So what do you do at 7 o'clock in the morning? What's open, where is there anywhere to look for employment?"

Even with a bed and a roof over your head, it's still hard to sleep in a shelter, she observes. "You know, if you're not used to being in them, around a whole bunch of people snoring, different attitudes, the lying down with lights out when you're not sleepy, things like that. And then you're there with people with all different kinds of problems, some mental — not that everyone doesn't have their idiosyncrasies, because everyone does."

Dee is not staying in a shelter now. Asked how she manages, she replies, "I stay here and there with friends. I stay on the street when it's warm; sometimes when it's not warm, I'm out on the street. I've slept in cars, benches. I've ridden on BART, and I've ridden the buses all night."

Riding the buses means coming up with the money to buy a bus pass, more and more of a problem for very low-income people as fares keep going up.

Some bus drivers are compassionate, but she has had some bad experiences too. Dee describes "my bus ride from hell. There's a particular driver that drives the 82 line." According to Dee, he is openly insulting to people who are homeless and manages to make their ride miserable.

"It's the way he wants to drive," she says. "The jerking of the bus because he thinks people are sleeping and he's watching everyone. So he starts jerking and he'll drive fast. All the drivers know where the bumps are. If it's your regular route, you know where everything is. You know the bumps and the dips and the curves, and when he gets to those big bumps he just flies over. And you can see him looking in the mirror — looking with a sadistic grin."

Not being able to get proper nutrition is another obvious problem that homeless people face every day. Not having a place to cook limits her options; but thanks to the money she earns by selling *Street Spirit,* Dee is able to buy a certain amount of nourishing, hot food. Otherwise she goes to places that provide free meals, but it's hard to find healthy food, she says. "Me being a diabetic with high blood pressure, with vascular problems, it's hard to get the nutrition that I need."

Dee's health problems and the miserable state of the health care system present a real horror story. All over the country, there are reports of lack of coverage, inadequate facilities, insufficient personnel, and, particularly, the closing of hospitals and clinics that serve poor people. Dee's experiences reflect all of these flaws in the health care system.

She describes being seriously misdiagnosed by an inattentive doctor at Alta Bates. "I find that at Alta Bates, if you're homeless, they don't want to really do anything for you — they want to tell you about Highland."

But it is at Highland where the problems with the system really hit home. Dee recites a list of ills, including delayed or botched surgeries, symptoms ignored, few

See **Stigma of Homelessness** *page 19*

A Homeless Woman's Last Gift

Author's note: Recently I was blessed by a homeless woman who gave me a gold coin when I told her things weren't going so well for me. Not long after her gift to me, she was murdered, found dead in San Luis Obispo Creek. It was reported that Sharon Ostman, 59, was battered and sexually assaulted before being murdered on the night of July 10, 2005.

I wrote this essay before she was killed and later sent it to the local daily as a tribute. The letters in response all told how truly generous Sharon Ostman was, how humane and kind.

by Stacey Warde

With no money in my pocket, less than $200 in the bank, and feeling a little bleak, I recently pleaded hardship to a homeless woman asking for a dollar in front of the post office.

"I'm sorry, but you're probably better off than I am right now," I said. I climbed into the passenger's side of the car, parked next to the curb.

"Oh," she said with concern, "would you like a dollar?"

I didn't really know what to say, but felt so good about her offer, I laughed.

"No, thank you," I said, warmed by her generosity. "I'm sure I'll be okay."

I smiled at the woman as she sat on the bench next to her various cardboard signs expressing need, hoping that I really would be okay. With little prospect of steady employment, and only a few sporadic cash jobs to squeak by, I didn't know if I was going to be okay or not.

Sharon Ostman's genuine concern made me feel I might. She got up from her place on the bench, and came up to the window on the passenger's side of the car.

"Here," she said, handing me a beautiful shiny gold dollar coin, featuring the Shoshone mother with child, Sacagawea. "She's one of my ancestors," Sharon continued. "Give it to a child, if you like."

"Thank you," I said, grateful and delighted. I examined the gold coin as she went back to her place on the bench.

Sacagawea's youthful face, head turned and baby strapped to her back, peered over her shoulder, expressing calm confidence. Her image suggested forward movement. Had it not been for Sacagawea, it's said, the historic Lewis and Clark expedition to the Northwest (1804-1806) would have failed. She was smart, resourceful and diplomatic. None of that really mattered to me at the moment. I was more enthralled with the coin's gold brilliance, and the homeless woman who gave it to me. I also basked in the kindness she had just shown me.

My companion, with whom I had washed windows that morning to earn some much-needed cash, seemed aghast. He didn't recognize Sacagawea.

"Is that a Susan B.?" he gasped. "Is that a silver dollar?" he added with emphasis on the "dollar."

"No, Bob, it's a gold coin. Susan B.'s not gold."

"You can't take money from a homeless person!" he exclaimed. "Here," he said, taking a dollar bill out of his wallet, "give her this dollar."

"What do you mean I can't take her dollar? Are you kidding? That was pure generosity," I responded.

She saw the exchange in the car and returned to the passenger's side and stooped down as I passed the thin paper dollar bill into her hand. "Thank you," she said.

And we were off. Since then, I've been much less stingy with my spare change, even when I don't have much to spare. What does it hurt? Actually, I feel so much better extending my hand to pad a homeless person's pocket than I do refusing to offer anything.

Until I met Sacagawea's descendant in front of the post office, I had grown sour with my own bleak circumstances, living hand to mouth, and with bums who wanted to take what little I had. I've heard stories of homeless people standing by the side of busy freeway exits, raking in dollar bills and larger from rush-hour commuters.

"Those guys make more money than I do," a friend once said. "They pull in as much as $50,000 a year."

"Right on!" I responded. "It's not the way I want to make a living, but if they can do it, more power to them."

Lately, I've been thinking: What's the difference between the homeless woman at the post office and me? Not much, really, except her kindness and generosity.

I want to be more like her. I feel better when I'm willing to give than when I'm hoarding what little I have.

And in this day, when the predominant "business" models taught in the university are little more than methodologies of greed, it's revolutionary to give. In that sense, Sharon Ostman revolutionized my thinking and my connection to people in the street. I have nothing to fear, and no need to respond with anger, when I'm willing to give. And I don't need to buy into the greed and blind hunger rampant in our culture. All of the great spiritual treatises and traditions we cherish point to a different path anyhow. A few seem to truly follow that path, like Sharon at the post office.

I've learned that no matter how little we have, we always have the option to bestow a gift, a blessing. In my mind, that's the best and highest good we can pursue in this life.

Thank you, Sharon, for blessing me.

This article first appeared in the October 2005 issue of *Street Spirit.*

A Homeless Woman's Struggle for Survival

For women, homelessness means being unable to feel safe and secure. It is a heavy burden to be constantly exposed to the dangers of theft, assault and abuse.

by Lydia Gans



Jenifer Beckmann has survived living on the streets of Berkeley and Oakland for the past eight years. Lydia Gans photo

Jenifer Beckmann is 58 years old, and has been homeless for the last eight years. She gave a sarcastic little laugh when I asked her why she is forced to live on the streets of Berkeley. "I'm homeless because a whole lot of other people are homeless right now," she said.

She explained, "Housing is simply not available for people on a low, fixed income." With the federal government continuing to slash funding for Section 8 housing and other programs to help the poor, life these days is "terrible," Jenifer said. She added, "The political environment, the money environment, the housing environment — all of it is just abysmal."

I asked her what her life is like now. "Very, very bad," she said. " I've never had a worse two years in my life. I sleep on the pavement. And I have been assaulted several times. Theft is a constant problem. Fears, nasty verbal contests."

Looking at her gaunt figure and listening to her raspy voice, it is obvious that being on the street has taken a toll on her health. In little more than a year she will be 60 years old. She has worked, she has raised a daughter, she has helped other people, she has paid her dues. And still society denies her a place of her own.

Being homeless doesn't just mean not having a roof over your head each night. It also means not having a place to wash, brush your teeth and use the toilet. It means not having a place to keep clean clothes, or a kitchen to store, prepare and eat the foods your body requires.

Being homeless means having no place for solitude and privacy when you need it and, at other times, feeling deprived of the company of friends and family. Maybe more than anything else, it means being unable to feel safe and secure. All of these hardships add up to an especially heavy burden on women who are homeless.

Jenifer grew up as one of six children in a poor family almost constantly on the move. She ticks off the many places where they lived, mostly small towns in northern California. She recalls that she was in 10th grade and living in Santa Rosa when John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

She graduated from high school when President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty was in full swing; and she got a job through the Neighborhood Youth Corps, ironically enough, with the Berkeley Police Department. At one point she enrolled in Merritt College hoping to get a teaching job, but it was a time when California had a huge surplus of teachers.

Jenifer continued to work for many years in spite of periodic nervous breakdowns; but she eventually had to go on permanent disability. She raised a daughter who now lives in Georgia. They keep in touch.

Her disability income, which is from SSA, is somewhat higher than SSI because she worked, but it is not sufficient to pay the exorbitant Bay Area rents. She has tried to apply for a Section 8 housing voucher but is having some bureaucratic difficulties. At one point, she moved to Boston where she thought that homeless people were better treated than they are here, but she soon came back.

For a while, Jenifer lived in subsidized housing at the California Hotel in Oakland, but she was very unhappy there. She explained, "I did not like being situated in housing that was predominantly dedicated, or given over, to people that were addicted to substances. The atmosphere there was not the kind of atmosphere you would want to be placed in if you were hoping to develop friendly relationships, or relationships that develop into friendships." Her only addiction, she insists, is to cigarettes.

Although her income is not sufficient to pay rent on an apartment of her own, she can manage to stay indoors occasionally for a few weeks at a time. She mentioned the Jefferson Hotel in Oakland where she can have cooking facilities, although that makes it more expensive.

"I want to do my own cooking," she said. "It's very important to me because I'm nutritionally conscious. I don't want to have to subsist on fast food. I don't want to eat junk foods that are loaded with sugar. I don't want the popular-brand peanut butter that's also loaded with sugar. I'm a very educated, nutritionally sound person."

Being alone, and not having any kind of support group to trust and depend on, is another consequence of homelessness, something that Jenifer feels very keenly.

We've all heard that old wisecrack, "Just because I'm paranoid doesn't mean that they're not out to get me." Living on the street certainly can cause a person to feel paranoid since it makes it very hard to maintain a circle of friends.

"There's this myth," Jenifer declared, "that street people are one big happy family, one big happy community. This is simply not so. (Especially) for women." She said the subculture fueled by drugs and alcohol can lead to "abusive behavior."

"So you run into all those problems," she said. "They're all antagonistic. Even in the normal culture, you run into antagonistic people who are opposite you in your achieving success at certain levels. At street level, it's tremendously concentrated and focused and you have all these competing, conflicting, antagonistic elements one against the other for survival!"

Jenifer called it a "matter of sheer survival. You have all these people fiercely competing in the matter of survival. So it gets just gruesome. Just absolutely gruesome at times. It isn't the friendly living, patting each other on the back, helping each other out."

In spite of that, she tries to reach out to others, sharing what little she has. "There is not a day goes by without me giving something that I have from my own spare change or from my own supply of accumulated goods," she said. "I have given away bedding, clothing, money, cigarettes, food. Not a single day goes by that I don't give away some item to other street people. That is the truth."

Although street people don't hang together, society insists on putting them all into one bag.

She observed, "You become stigmatized. The whole thing with street people is that you are systematically stigmatized over and over again. And the authorities then look down on you and say you are obviously someone not competent with your affairs. Therefore this person and that person and the other person will all be able to stand in judgment of you at various points. And pass judgment on you *and make your life difficult, if they* choose to do so. And that does happen."

While every homeless person is engaged in a constant struggle just to survive from day to day, society turns away. "I just want to say this," Jenifer declared. "The homeless problem is not intractable; it is not insoluble. They could have solved it a long time ago. They don't want to."

Asked who could solve it, she replied, "The government. They could have solved it a long time ago. They don't want to, because there are special interest groups all over the place. If they do not solve the homeless problem, they have this very convenient scapegoat situated there that looks absolutely guilty. They can point at them and say, 'See, it's them that's destroying the neighborhood; it's them that's creating all these terrible things.' That's a very convenient scapegoat. Anyone can point at them and they seem guilty."

This article first appeared in the May 2005 issue of *Street Spirit.*

Stigma of Homelessness

from page 18

signs of caring or compassion, and waiting for hours to be seen. "You're there anywhere up to 12 hours," she charges.

She needs more surgery to avoid having to have a foot amputated. But, she says, "you can't get into the clinic. Every time you go, it's a year wait. It took me three years to get into the dental clinic."

"And then they never have your records. Every time I go up there — it doesn't matter when I go — I always end up having to go to the patient advocate's office because they never have my records where I'm supposed to be. So if I have a 12:30 appointment, I'm not getting out till five. It happens all the time. Every single time."

The abysmal record keeping has caused her problems with getting MediCal, and she is still waiting to get on SSI. Her MediCal application was pending for "almost a year," Dee says. "Pending so long, always pending, always pending, always waiting. When you're homeless, you're always waiting on this, waiting on that. It's a stigma."

In spite of her poor health, Dee would like to have a regular job. She has experience and marketable skills. But, as she points out, "when you have nowhere to stay, it's hard to get a job because, first of all, you have to find somewhere that you're able to have hygiene, and a telephone, and somewhere to stay and somewhere to be able to iron your clothes."

She had a car at one time but it blew a head gasket so she couldn't move it and eventually it was towed. "Once my car was towed, I wasn't living out of that any more," she says. "I really was out of luck. It's hard. It's hard being homeless, it really is hard. Some people think it's a choice.

"When I first started selling *Street Spirit,* I would only do it at night because I was embarrassed. I didn't want anyone that I used to work with to see me doing it. But then, eventually I got to the point: Well, it's honest. I'm trying to sell something. I believe in the paper. I think it's a good newspaper and I'm not just standing out there with a cup asking for money."

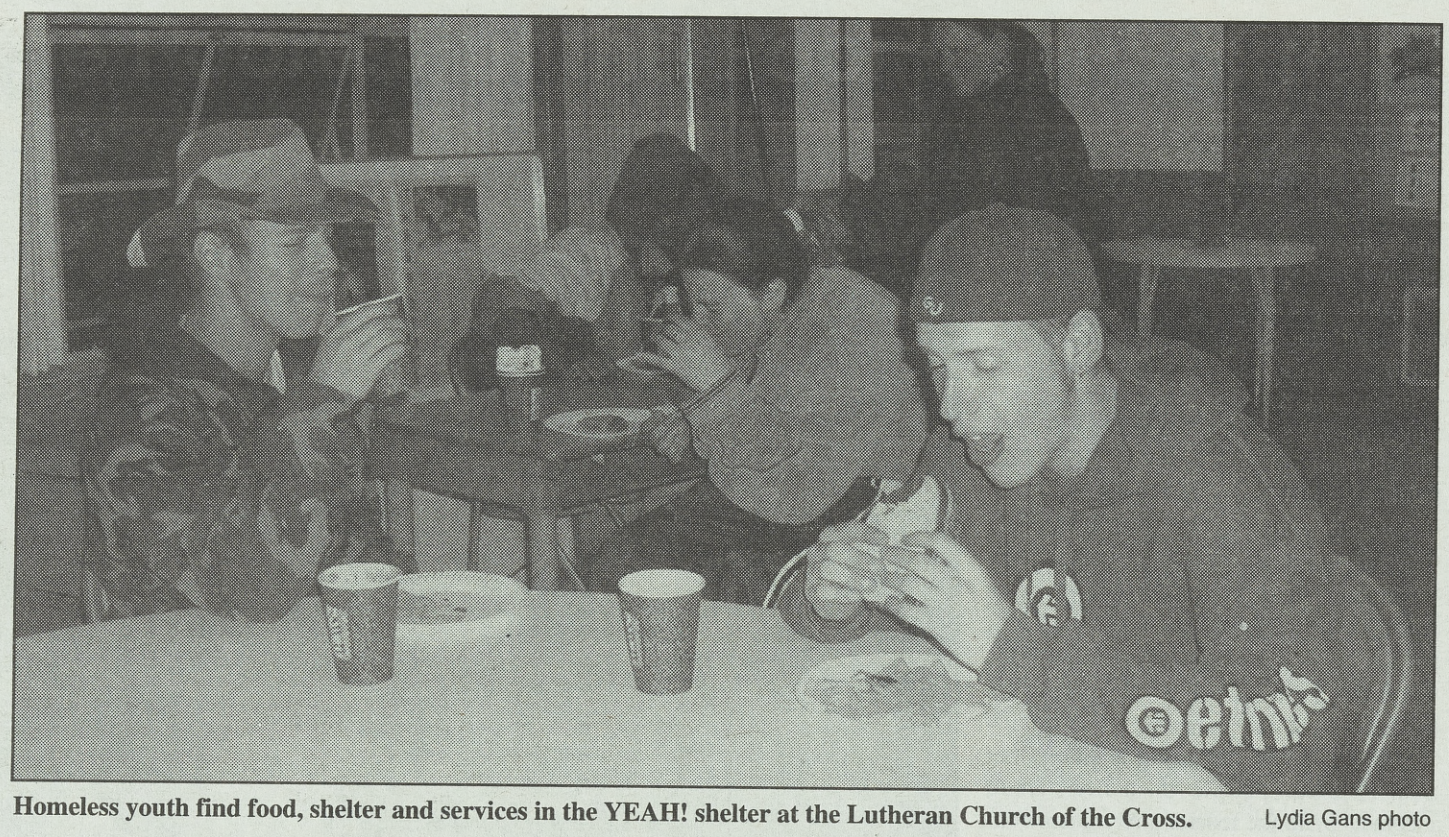
But there is always the stigma of homelessness. "Even standing here," she says, "I find a lot of people are nice to me, but then you're going to have some people that act like it's going to rub off. You don't have to give me money. Not everybody is able to give. But, you know, the acknowledgement, the smile, the speaking, being courteous, doesn't hurt anyone.

"Because whether you give to me or not, I'm always going to tell you, 'Have a nice day.' And they're not even listening to you. You're telling them, 'Have a nice day,' and they're telling you, 'No, not today.' That's because they've already preconceived that you're about to ask for something so they're not listening to what you're actually saying. Or even saying hello, or good morning."

This article first appeared in the June 2005 issue of *Street Spirit.*

YEAH Youth Shelter

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Homeless youth find food, shelter and services in the YEAH! shelter at the Lutheran Church of the Cross. Lydia Gans photo

that they immediately agreed. "They were totally receptive, and it was very well received," Rev. Isakson said. In fact, about one-third of her congregation now actively volunteers in the shelter program. They come down to spend time with the youth in the shelter, collect clothing and blankets, bring food, and several stay overnight and cook food for the youth.

The task of sheltering homeless youth has now literally taken over large portions of the Lutheran Church of the Cross, including the large community hall, two kitchens, two bathrooms and a shower, and a couple other rooms.

Isakson said the experience of housing the shelter "has been wonderful" for her congregation because it is part of their life of faith. One of the marks of discipleship, she said, is "to give and to serve in the community." It is especially important to serve the poor and marginalized, she added, including "the street kids, the addicts, the people that are discriminated against."

"I always preach inclusivity — that Christ, I believe, came to include those who had been formerly excluded," she said. "That's my message, basically, and we have so much abundance of God's wealth and generosity, that we need to share it."

If her work with homeless youth began with what sounds like the otherworldly sentiments of theology, it quickly turned into something very down-to-earth — or, more accurately, funky, dirty and sweaty.

Rev. Isakson estimates that she now spends 50 hours a week at the shelter, cleaning bathrooms, plunging toilets, dealing with laundry, shopping for groceries, cleaning refrigerators, and going to the recycling stores to "beg and borrow clothing and dishes."

Sharon Hawkins Leyden said of Rev. Isakson's dedication: "She's down at the shelter almost every night. She's just a saint, she's just down there constantly, solving problems and just hanging out. And then during the day she's running to the store to buy milk and running to the YMCA to get the blankets and sheets washed. I mean, she's unbelievable."

A SANCTUARY FOR PETS, TOO

In order to really create a sense of home for street youth, the YEAH team decided to open up the shelter as a home for their extended family — their pets. "The youth are so attached to their animals that they're almost like extended family members," Leyden explained. "They're part of their community of youth on the streets. So we didn't see any reason why we had to separate them from the very thing that they're the most attached to in the world. So we decided that we would bring everyone indoors."

The animals have complicated things a bit by adding to the clean-up chores. At the beginning of the winter season, the shelter had a lot of puppies that weren't housetrained, so it took extra effort to keep the place clean. But, all in all, things have gone surprisingly well.

"Most of the time, the youth are really good at handling their pets and keep them on a tight rein," Leyden said. "They'll make their bed and they'll make a bed for the dog right next to them with a blanket, and they'll cover the dog. You'll see a grown 24-year-old man sleeping on our little cots with his dog on his lap. One guy one night had a cat, a rat and a dog all on the cot with him. The dog was by his feet, the cat was on his lap and the rat was by his shoulder. They care about their pets just as much if not more than they care about each other."

SUPPORT FROM CITY OF BERKELEY

Isakson is quick to credit Berkeley officials with now seeing the need to support a shelter for homeless youth. "I think they're making a big effort right now to undo years of inactivity on this issue," she said. "They're fighting years and years of inertia in dealing with street youth, and I think they're making some good inroads and they're really talking about it."

Rev. Isakson said that Mayor Tom Bates and Berkeley City Councilmembers Linda Maio and Dona Springs have been "very helpful" and have attended YEAH's fundraising events. She had special praise for Stephen Barton and Jay Nicoloff of the Berkeley Housing Department.

"Jay Nicoloff has been very supportive. Steve Barton has been tremendous," Isakson said. "He's been very helpful right from the beginning, realizing how important it was for us to have the shelter. And they wanted a group of people with humanitarian interests in Berkeley to volunteer and get together and do this."

This year, the City of Berkeley gave YEAH $15,000 to help fund its shelter program for the four-month period.

Leyden said she found the Berkeley Housing Department "totally responsive — 110 percent." Meeting with them was like "preaching to the converted," she said. "I think that they are really passionate about wanting to solve this problem of homeless youth. They see this as a problem for Berkeley, and they see it as totally solvable. They don't want to just move the youth out, like some cities; they actually want to make sure they get the services they need to move on with their lives, and they're really quite committed to that."

In the four months from December 1, 2003, to March 31, 2004, the YEAH program provided a total of more than 4,000 shelter-nights for 44 different women and 136 different men, ages 18-25. This means that a high percentage of the estimated overall population of homeless youth in Berkeley is going through the shelter.

When the shelter is open, said Leyden, there is "a huge reduction in the ticketing by police that happens up on Telegraph Avenue." Also, Leyden added, the two daytime drop-in centers that serve youth in Berkeley — Jubi's Spot and the Chaplaincy to the Homeless — report that they "can actually do their job because the kids don't come in there tired. They come in there after having slept all night. So the city officials see it as a complete win-win."

NEED FOR A YEAR-ROUND SHELTER

The YEAH founders say they have a burning desire to create a year-round shelter for homeless youth. They intend to appeal to the City of Berkeley and to different funders for more money to hire more staff to run the shelter longer, and to build in more support services.

"The need has always been for a year-round shelter," Leyden said. "It doesn't matter if the weather is nice; if they don't have a place to sleep, then they can't do anything during the day and they're stuck in the cycle. We always wanted to do it 24/7 and 365 days a year. It's desperately needed, because we don't want these kids to be homeless adults 10 years from now. We want to solve it now."

Leyden said that each young person they have sheltered needs his or her own individual plan to overcome the factors that result in homelessness. "It's going to take two or three years for each kid," she said, "and then I think we'll see a difference. I think we'll have kids who can actually get back to being more productive with their lives and fulfill their dreams."

Adrianne Bank asked the homeless youth if the shelter was needed year-round. "They said as soon as the Spring comes and we become more visible, the cops start hassling us. It's better to get a safe night's sleep where we can sleep the whole night than have to be rousted out two or three times each night and be worrying about that all the time. So they were saying, 'Please stay open year-round.'"

Bank said that the YEAH planners now have a five-year vision of what the City of Berkeley should do for young people on the street. They are calling for an integrated set of services with people in each of the service areas who understand the developmental issues of adolescence. "They are as much like youth everywhere as they are like homeless people," Bank explained. "They're the intersect of youth and homelessness. People really need to understand that when being involved with them."

"We would like a coordinated system of social services and medical services available to them. We would like a coordinated set of activities which give them some sense of their abilities, skills and talents. And we would like to organize adult allies who could help along the way as ombudsmen or mentors or case managers. We think the combination of adult allies, youth-oriented activities which will grab them and interest them and give them a direction to go, and a whole set of coordinated social services might be the combination that could move them off the streets."

The YEAH program has already found some very dedicated "adult allies." Bank coordinates, trains and recruits volunteers. YEAH had about 40 regular volunteers all winter. They need about four people on site every night because 40-50 youth and five to seven dogs are a lot to manage.

Leyden places great emphasis on community involvement. She said, "There are a lot of people in Berkeley who really, really care about wanting to make a difference and can't stand walking past another person on the street and not knowing what to do. We are trying to galvanize that spirit in Berkeley, because Berkeley does have that kind of spirit. We want to try to get them engaged in advocating and showing up and mentoring and teaching and learning."

A steadfast group of volunteers has become indispensable to the work. "We have amazing things like a group of three women who call themselves the Monday Night Team," Leyden said. "They come every Monday night and they love each other and they have very specific jobs set up for themselves. One woman stays home all Monday, cooks all day for the kids, brings a huge pot of food, and they serve the kids. And the three people that volunteer on Monday split the costs of that meal! And one of them always sleeps over. They say, 'We're the best team of the week.' They have like their own little culture and they just love it. One of the women told me last night, 'Well, this is the highlight of my week. I just feel like I'm making such a difference.'"

Volunteers spend time with the youth from 8-10 p.m. at night, bring and prepare food, shop for the kids, and drive them places. They donate clothing and bedding and also drop off pet food. People come in to do poetry workshops, drama and meditation groups. Speakers talk about recovery programs and job programs.

Rev. Isakson said, "Over 50 volunteers from the Community Impact organization came in and painted and made masks with the kids and did all sorts of great projects. Someone comes in and says they'd like to do African drumming tonight; and another woman just heard about us and wants to cook a Thai meal for the kids."

Adrianne Bank tried to explain the sense of rightness she has felt in her work with YEAH. It has something to do with overcoming alienation and replacing it with a new-found sense of community.

Bank said, "My enduring memory is one of the coldest, rainiest nights in Berkeley. We had an overflow crowd — kids sitting at the piano playing a song, a bunch of guys at one table playing cards, and some volunteers who'd brought in board games and they were sitting around playing. There were other people watching television. And I thought, you know, this looks like a grungy college dorm, because the bedding was spread out and people's belongings were all over the place and the pets were around.

"It had this mellow kind of lovely community feel. I knew it was a bit romantic of me to read into this any more than a good moment; but it was just a kind of picture of what could happen with these kids whose daytime life is so difficult and tiresome and hassled and frustrating. To think that they could have a little bit of nighttime respite in this way was very reassuring."

This article first appeared in the April 2004 issue of *Street Spirit.*

Spiritual Solidarity with the Poor

from page 5

came out here to California to the Graduate Theological Union for a sabbatical. I came out here, got an apartment, signed up at the Franciscan School here, and they never saw me again. I freelanced for two years. I prayed, I rested, I did artwork, I read, I studied. I stayed out by the water; I stayed in the woods. It was actually the most wonderful thing I ever did.

MH: *How did that lead into your present organizing work on homeless issues?*

SBG: What moved me into homelessness was that, during my sabbatical, I was exposed to the growing homelessness here in northern California. I had an apartment on the corner of Shattuck and Virginia in Berkeley. I really do cry when I speak of these most sacred moments. Every morning about five or five thirty, I would hear this shopping cart on the street. And the questions come: Why this poverty? Why do textile workers have to ruin their health to make a living? Why do people have to live on the streets? It's so unnecessary. It is so wrong, morally wrong.

They're homeless people. They have to leave the shelters very early in the morning. In the winter time, it's still very dark. It was from those moments that the seed, the call to work with homeless people, was planted in my heart.

All we have to do to nourish that is to let it be there, let it rest. And you will be led to what you are to do. So a few months before my sabbatical was finished, I went up to a sister who was one of my great heroes. She started a shelter in Chicago. So I just said, "For room and board, can I just come and work with you for a few months?" I worked with homeless families in the shelter. Then I came back and still didn't know what I was going to do.

MH: *You came back to the Bay Area at this point?*

SBG: In San Francisco, the union offered me a job to work with a health care workers' union. Their office happened to be in this building (where Religious Witness is now located). I was exposed every day more intensely to homeless people. I see all of that as quite providential. After two years of organizing for Local 250, I quit my job because I was going to work with homeless people. I didn't know what I was going to do. I started walking the streets here. I started talking with people. That was September 1, 1993. Frank Jordan started his Matrix program one month later.

MH: *Former Mayor Frank Jordan began using the police to criminalize homeless people for quality of life violations. Did that lead to the founding of Religious Witness with Homeless People?*

SBG: What I saw glaringly absent was the united voice of the faith community speaking out against this vicious attack on poor people. They were being arrested every day by the dozens, up to today. Over 135,000 citations, arrests and jailing of poor people have occurred in San Francisco. That was the Matrix program.

Willie Brown changed the name of it, but the arrests and citations and jailings have continued. It's extremely expensive. It's totally inhumane. And the religious community should have a voice to speak out against this. I organized religious leaders to come together to speak out publicly against the Matrix program. That was the beginning of Religious Witness with Homeless People. That's the name that we gave ourselves.

At the first meeting we had about 10 or 12 religious leaders. They responded immediately. I think at the next meeting, we had about 30 people. We drafted a statement which was our basic Religious Witness document, drafted a statement speaking out against the cruel treatment of poor people of San Francisco. We took it to City Hall and had a press conference and took it up to Mayor Jordan and demanded a meeting with him.

So that was the beginning of Religious Witness. But what life is all about is simply being led by your heart and your heart is directed by Whom you were formed to be when you came into the world.

MH: *Is this kind of police repression still going on in San Francisco today?*

SBG: The citing, arresting, and jailing certainly continues today. But what is more atrocious is the growing callousness of the — I don't want to blame the people of San Francisco — big businesses and self-serving politicians that have become so outraged at the number of homeless people, not from compassion. That homeless people are getting in the way of our progress, getting in the way of our city. There has been this collusion with certain politicians and the big business corporations of this town to get homeless people out of sight and out of mind. That's what Matrix is all about.

Now we have this institutionalized collusion and currently that is reflected in Supervisor Gavin Newsom running for mayor (and) the hotel and restaurant industry and other big corporations who want homeless people out of sight, who want them to leave town. And it is reflected in their setting him up as the mayoral candidate and they're promoting him with all (their) wealth.

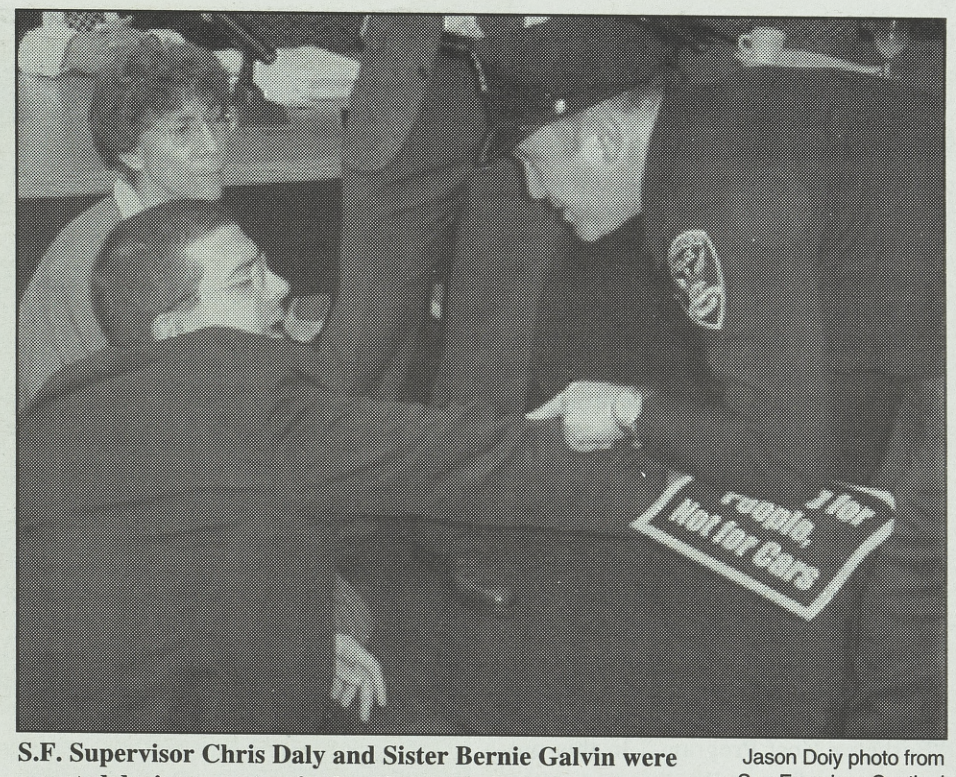
The collusion between the two has resulted in two morally outrageous ballot initiatives. One was last year, which is Proposition N. That was Care Not Cash, which simply (means): "Let us punish the people who have the least. Let us take their money and let them survive on $59 a month. Oh, we'll give them housing in lieu of giving them the cash. We'll give them treatment in lieu of giving them the cash." But there is no treatment, there is no housing available. There are thousands of people on the waiting list for housing. There are at least 1,400 on the waiting list for treatment every day, and all that Care Not Cash could do is to add people to that waiting list. It is totally deceptive. It offers false hope.

The second thing that just passed is the anti-panhandling Proposition M. (First) we take their money; now we say it's against the law for them to beg for money. That's happening in this city of St. Francis, who was a beggar, whose whole life was out of compassion and loving concern for poor people. What has happened is a result of collusion between the politicians and the wealthy businesses.

The ordinary people of San Francisco, I still say, are a compassionate people, despite the 60 percent that voted to support these two initiatives. What has happened is that they are upset about the growing number of homeless people. In 1993, when I started Religious Witness, to the present time, the number of homeless people on the streets of San Francisco has doubled. It was like 7,000 or 8,000 in those days, and now it's like 12,000 to 15,000. So people who care about men and women and children living on the streets, and dying on the streets, don't know what to do. So here come the politicians, our elected officials. This is compassion?

MH: *Would the money that was saved by cutting down the General Assistance checks — is it guaranteed that that money would go into housing and treatment for the poor?*

SBG: That is what the program called for. If you look at Prop N, it says it (the saved money) would be used for more workers. It says that it would be used for administration costs. It would be used for computers to upgrade the system by keeping track. There were like 12 things that that money would be used for. But, even if it would all be used to supply housing and treatment, looking at the backlog, it would be totally inadequate — a drop in the bucket. It's no solution and not compassionate. Over two million dollars was spent convincing the people of San Francisco that it was a solution. People readily responded.



S.F. Supervisor Chris Daly and Sister Bernie Galvin were arrested during a protest for housing at Hastings Law School. Jason Doiy photo from San Francisco Sentinel

MH: *Do you feel civil disobedience can be an effective method of working for justice for the homeless? I understand that you were on the front page of the San Francisco Chronicle in connection with civil disobedience.*

SBG: That's just one thing in a long line. Civil disobedience is the most powerful means of influencing social change, any time you're trying to change a social situation. At Religious Witness, we've engaged in that many times. Certainly, it's a part and parcel of trying to bring about peace. So that (the action featured in the *San Francisco Chronicle*) was our peace demonstration against the war in Iraq. We also did a Presidio Campaign. I think we were arrested out there about six times. We did a Union Square (action). It's been part and parcel of Religious Witness.

MH: *I remember the Presidio actions, trying to get housing out there for the homeless.*

SBG: It's still standing today. We didn't succeed in getting the poor people in, but we succeeded in (preventing) $100 million worth of housing from being torn down. Nancy Pelosi was the one who prevented our getting poor people out there. They want to tear down the old public health building and build condominiums there. There are environmentalist groups who are fighting back. But they're ready to build housing for the wealthy. It's all about establishing an elite city within a city. It's all about money.

MH: *How do you deal with your feelings about the large number of deaths among the homeless?*

SBG: I'm growing in moral outrage against the failure of society to respond to all people in society, not just the wealthy. It just tears one's heart out. There's no other way to deal. It just tears you up. And what is further outrageous: People are dying on the streets, and then comes Gavin Newsom using homeless deaths to say, "You pass Prop M and don't let people beg, there won't be these homeless deaths, because they use that money to buy alcohol and drugs, and kill themselves." A huge billboard shows that 169 people died on the streets — Pass Prop M.

The whole purpose (of Religious Witness using the memorial wall with the names of homeless people who died on the streets) is all about consciousness-raising. There can never be social change unless the consciousness of people is raised.

MH: *Are there antidotes to the depression from dealing with homelessness?*

SBG: There is one situation that continues to grip my heart because it speaks to the amazing steely strength of the human spirit under the most degrading circumstances. The story that exemplifies that occurred when I was still on sabbatical, and had this growing awareness and concern about homelessness. I used to go to People's Park and just sit and soak in that almost unbelievable reality.

One day I went there, and it had just rained. You know how muddy People's Park is with all the grass worn off. There were puddles of mud and water. And I saw this old man, with very dirty clothes, two or three layers, just most bedraggled, and he was sitting. Pretty soon he got up, took a couple of steps and he leaned over and cradled something in his hand. In the middle of one of the mud piles that were sticking out there was a little wild flower. It was a very small, purple, violet-like flower. And he went over there, and leaned over and cradled that, and just looked at it for a while.

The question that comes to mind is: "How can anyone living in such extreme poverty, living under such oppression, and especially in the midst of wealth, how can a human being continue to see and cherish the tiniest symbol of life and being?" That is an amazing testimony to the human spirit. And you see the same thing in the smiles of the homeless people. They get up everyday and continue to live.

The hope that can continue to survive in the midst of such oppression is astounding. And always, people are saying, "How can you continue?" It's always a struggle. You lose on Prop N, You lose on Prop M. Always it's a struggle. It is and always has been (a struggle for) the people, the sugar cane workers in south Louisiana, the textile workers in Appalachia, the homeless people out here. That is what I see in them. It has always been my own strength.

MH: *What does the future landscape look like for the homeless with the passage of Proposition M and Newsom in the mayoral race in San Francisco?*

SBG: It doesn't change who we are or what we do. We will continue to struggle as we have all along in trying to stand with poor people, stand firmly with poor people in support of their own dignity, their own struggle, their own rights — basic human rights. It will not change who we are or what we do.

This interview originally appeared in the December 2003 issue of *Street Spirit*.

Dona Spring's Life

from page 1

would criminalize the homeless. She was one of a minority on the Berkeley City Council, along with Kriss Worthington and Max Anderson, who voted against the "public commons for everyone" legislation proposed by Mayor Tom Bates.

The legislation, in fact, would have limited the access of homeless people to the public commons. According to Worthington, as a result of Dona Spring's efforts, the more draconian parts of that legislation were not passed. The City of Berkeley agreed to study several measures that might assist homeless people, such as providing more public toilets. Worthington pointed out that this would help customers in business places as well.

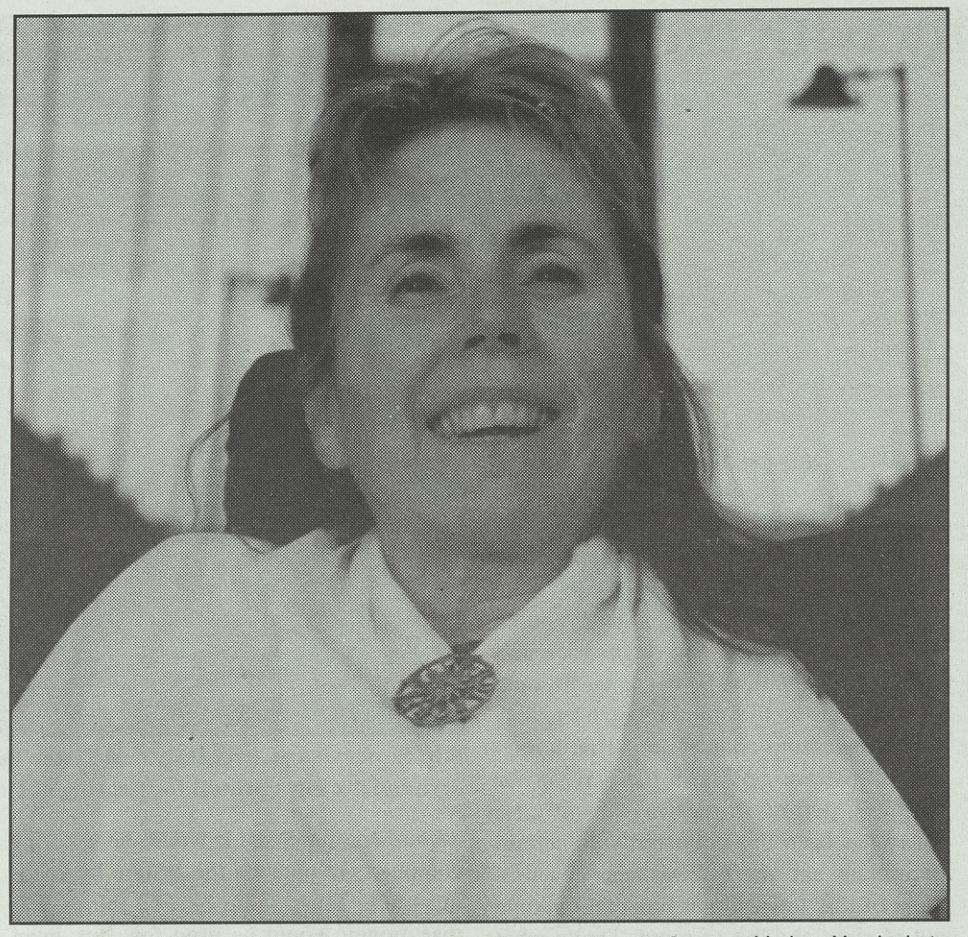
Dona also proposed another measure that the City Council enacted: the "Berkeley Host Program." In this program, according to Worthington, rather than sending the police to harass homeless people when issues arise, an outreach team will try to find out what is going on. The team will inform and educate homeless people about quality of life infractions as well as help them to obtain services in areas such as drug and alcohol recovery and emergency shelter.

However, Worthington expressed concern that the mayor and city manager were choosing the wrong groups to manage this program. "The Downtown Berkeley Association (DBA) and the Telegraph Business Improvement District (TBID) both have a history of attacking the homeless," Worthington said.

Dona opposed police sweeps of homeless people, as well as laws that outlaw sitting on sidewalks. She stood against laws that make it a crime to be homeless in a society which, according to Worthington, has no serious economic agenda to provide jobs and housing for all its citizens.

She was instrumental in helping homeless individuals as well, in particular when their vehicles were towed. In a vicious circle, tickets for vehicle violations may be sent to a homeless person's mailbox. By the time the homeless person checks his or her box, other tickets have accumulated, at which point their vehicles are impounded. A homeless person, barely surviving, cannot afford these fines.

Dona helped people get their vehicles out of impoundment. She called owners of companies and raised money to help people get their vehicles back. She connected homeless people to lawyers when their vehicles were illegally impounded.



Dona Spring believed her purpose on earth was to serve others. Lindsay Vurek photo

Dona was also in the forefront of budget battles on behalf of homeless people. She would passionately stand up against budget cutbacks of homeless services, and she organized people to come and protest when such cuts were proposed.

Thanks to her advocacy, she was able to get homeless services and programs funded by the City of Berkeley, such as funding for women's shelter services, as well as through the state and federal governments. At one point in her career, she led the charge to open up the Veterans Memorial Building in Berkeley as a homeless shelter service.

Worthington said that Dona Spring was his closest associate on the council and that talking to her always brightened his week. "She was a trailblazer with a lot of visionary ideas," he said. "She gave me courage and hope that we could get these things done some day."

Among the many causes in which Dona was actively engaged, he mentioned animal rights, the peace movement, landmark and historic preservation, environmental issues, homelessness and disabled issues. "She went way beyond lip service and really got involved," he said.

One of the causes that Dona was dedicated to was preserving the oak trees in the Memorial Grove at the University of California Berkeley. On June 22, 2008, LA Wood made a short video of Dona's last public appearance at the Oak Grove. She was in great pain and weighed only 75 pounds (her healthy weight was between 115 and 120 pounds).

Lindsay Vurek commented that Dona "endured so much pain, and did so much for us when most of us would have checked out of life years ago. For a long time her spine was curving into her lungs, and she could barely breathe."

In her last public remarks at the Oak Grove as recorded in Wood's video, Dona said, "We must stop the corporate giant from crushing not only our community, but our earth." In an ironic aside, she said the oak trees were more deserving of living than the regents of the university.

Dona Spring gave herself up to the path of the prophet, a vehicle and messenger for justice in our world. Just as easily, she could have taken the path of a visionary artist and spiritual counselor. In some respects she combined all these paths.

When I first saw two of her paintings hanging on a wall in her home, I thought they were Georgia O'Keefe reproductions. One is a medley of flower petals, so joined together that the universe itself becomes the petals — beautiful, soft, and allowing all petals to be. This was Dona's vision which she tried to externalize in our world. The oneness manifested in this painting she knew as internal and eternal truth. The second painting, equally remarkable, portrays a bird in its ascending and descending aspects.

According to Dennis Walton, Dona at one time identified herself as an artist. Although she never relinquished her identity as an artist, after she was elected to public office, her focus of identity changed to that of a public servant. Whether as an artist or a public servant, Dona could empty herself of ego and let the spirit come through, whether in the political arena or in paint on canvas.

Although she never practiced professionally, Dona was also a spiritual counselor and guide to many. As Walton put it, she had an "intuitive generosity." She would call someone up, not knowing they were going through a depression, and leave a message sharing positive feelings that would lift their spirits.

"She brought light to a lot of people," Walton said. "One way or another, she was a counselor, whether a civic councilor in public or a spiritual counselor in private." All of her work was spiritually based.

One can talk about the fact that Dona meditated for many years, enjoyed sacred chanting in the East Indian traditions, and enjoyed learning about the wisdom traditions of all cultures, in particular the Judeo-Christian heritage in her last years. According to Walton, "She was a seeker of truth in all traditions." He said that although she rejected most guru cults, she was particularly drawn to the Vedic, cosmic, all-inclusive vision of things.

However, Dona's spirituality went beyond the aforementioned "practices." She was not religious in the sense of attending church or any other culturally defined and based religious group. She did not practice any religion exclusively in an external sense. She was, however, a very spiritual, sensitive person who lived, breathed and embodied her spiritual religiosity.

What I do know about Dona is that she believed her purpose on earth was to serve others. She was one of those rare people who could do that without becoming fanatical or power-hungry.

Dona Spring died on July 13, 2008, at Alta Bates hospital in Berkeley. She was not afraid of death, as she knew her body, frail as it was, was a temporary home for her spirit. When she requested an end to medical intervention and said, "It is done," she knew only this chapter was done, this great act of kindness which was her life among us — with the help of her ever-faithful companion Dennis Walton.

Dona Spring is one of the few humans who could and did leave her body without guilt and remorse, having only brought about good in the world while she was here.

Kerry's Undying Dream of Health Care

from page 4

now helps coordinate the health van's visits to homeless sites. She described the meaning of Kerry's Kids to the family her daughter-in-law left behind. "It's a blessing. If we didn't have this piece of Kerry with us it would be so tragic, because her vision was to meet the medical needs of indigent children. It's a wonderful legacy because she was so compassionate and caring and people have just taken up this mantle of her quest and vision."

The family laid the groundwork for Kerry's Kids immediately after her death, setting up a memorial fund in her honor that made it all possible. The pediatricians and medical staff at Kerry's Kids are all volunteers, but money is needed for supplies, medications, insurance and other expenses. Oakland Head Start donates the RV, the vehicle maintenance and gas; and Bennie Smith is behind the wheel, driving the RV to homeless sites all over Oakland and West Berkeley. The women of All Saints Lutheran Church collected scores of teddy bears to donate to Kerry's Kids, and those are given out along with children's books to make the health van's visits more special for the homeless kids.

But Kerry's Kids operates on a shoestring budget, receiving no governmental grants from Alameda County or the federal government, even though it is providing health care for the children in poverty that are supposed to be cared for by governmental medical assistance and funding.

The beauty of Kerry's Kids is that it was not launched by a big medical foundation or by seasoned professional fundraisers. Rather, it was launched by relative babes in the woods, by people who had a dream of giving away free health care to homeless children, by family members who were faithful to the last dream of a tragically murdered daughter and wife. All they had when they started out was heart and compassion and commitment, and that is still true today.

But if the program is modest, without governmental support or big celebrity benefits, it may benefit from something still more powerful. Dr. Kruger says flatly, "I think Kerry's directing it from above, myself, personally speaking."

Each year, Children's Hospital awards a resident the Kerry Spooner-Dean Memorial Award that honors a doctor's commitment to delivering health care to underserved communities. The 2001 award winner was Dana Weintraub, M.D., a chief resident at Children's and volunteer pediatrician for Kerry's Kids.

Kerry's work lives on today in the children she helped while alive, the Children's Hospital scholarship, and, above all, in Kerry's Kids. Dr. Kruger said, "I think Kerry's Kids is a great dream come true. In a lot of ways, I see ripples, like how you throw a pebble in the water and these ripples go out. It's just how goodness can spread. It just spread beyond to people she never met in her lifetime."

Friends recall how resilient Kerry had been in life, how she kept bouncing back. Kerry's Kids might be the ultimate act of bouncing back from sorrow and tragedy.

Kruger said, "I think it's a combination of her dream, the person she was, all the people nearby that knew her and wanted to make some sense of her life not being longer than it was. No one knows about tomorrow, but it just seems unbelievable. I mean, a lot of us saw her that day (she was killed) and she was fine, you know?

"So it helped to just bring some little bit of peace — that she was somehow still a little bit here, or that she would have at least liked that Kerry's Kids was happening since she didn't have enough time to finish it herself."

Kruger, her friend in life, works to this day in honor of Kerry's legacy. Asked what Kerry's reaction would be if she could see the continuation of her life's work, Dr. Kruger said, "I think she would be pleased and just be so grateful. She'd say, 'Oh, thank you guys for doing this! I can't believe you did this!' "

This article first appeared in the April 2002 issue of *Street Spirit.*

Susan Prather Interview

from page 3

drop-in centers and really treated homelessness as an issue that could have been solved. In the '80s we had Reagan in the White House and Secretary Pierce at HUD, and he didn't build one stick of federal housing with any federal dollars. In the '80s they moved federal money from the housing budget to the Pentagon. And there's been almost no public housing built since that time. You know, that's contributed tremendously to the homeless problem.

However, in Contra Costa at that time, if there had been shelters and services and this (had) been taken seriously as a very important issue, I think it could have been more manageable. But it wasn't. Instead it was ignored and denied. People were blamed because they were there. It's awful. And now it's going to take a lot of federal dollars and a lot of political courage to do anything to turn this around.

I just don't think anyone had that kind of political courage. People who run for office these days don't have courage. The '90s are worse than ever. It's worse now than when I started. The issues around homelessness (are) just terrible, because people blame the people who are poor and homeless for being where they are, rather than blaming the economy or the lack of affordable housing or low-income housing, or the fact that we have no jobs.

There (are) no jobs today. The economy is in the toilet. We're losing jobs by the thousands. And everyone says, "Why don't they just get a job?" They can't get a job because they don't have a ticket to India.

It's horrible. It's worse now than it was in the '80s. It's much worse now than when I first started to do this work. It's much harder on people. The homeless population has aged — a lot of elderly people, senior people. There is a tremendous amount of children. I see where I work now at Fresh Start, a tremendous amount of elderly people who have lost their housing, who don't have families, with no one to help them. It's horrible.

MH: *When were you hired to direct Fresh Start? Was Fresh Start partly or all your idea, and were you the founder?*

SP: I created Fresh Start at the invitation of the City of Walnut Creek, which, after all my troublemaking ways, is quite a shock. I've always been pretty controversial with public officials.

I had read in the newspaper that a woman in Rossmoor had left $250,000 to the City of Walnut Creek to serve the city's homeless. I guess they had it for awhile, and then it came up again in a meeting. When I read this article, I sent a note to the city manager and some members of the council. I said, "Don't give that money away," because all these nonprofits were lined up to take that money away. But I said, "You have homeless people in your town. I know where they are. I know who some of them are. And they've been here for years." And I said, "People don't leave their safe area. You could use that money to serve those people, and help them get off the streets."

They came to meet with me, and then they asked me to do an assessment of how many homeless people they had. So I spent two weeks talking to people who are homeless. I met just in that first ten days about 34 people. So then the city asked me to create a program, something to serve the people in Walnut Creek, but not to duplicate any bureaucracy — to make it work so people could access the agencies that were already available, which are very hard to access sometimes. It's very hard to get Social Security, very hard to get county or state benefits.

So Fresh Start evolved from that. The first year I worked in a city park on a bench behind the big white gazebo. Everybody who wanted to see me knew I'd be there at noon on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and they would all come to the park. I was getting people their California ID's and birth certificates and helping people get Social Security. The first year or two, we housed 20 people that either had been thrown off Section Eight for illegal reasons, or they needed to get reinstated on the list. Or we helped them get benefits so they could rent their own housing.

But people were there, and they had no one to talk to, no one to guide them, no one to help them and, above all, to advocate for them. One of the things Fresh Start has done is create a community for poor and homeless people where there was no community. I worked under the auspices of the city until that $250,000 was gone, which was two and a half years. It lasted a long time. We helped a lot of people. When that money was gone, we turned Fresh Start into a private nonprofit.

MH: *Were you responsible for the name "Fresh Start"?*

SP: Yes, it came from Ruth Brinker (who started Project Open Hand). I talked to Ruth Brinker who did Fresh Start Farms in San Francisco. I always thought that was a wonderful way to help people, with a garden and with farming, and to grow things. I talked to her because I wanted to learn how to do that. The idea for Fresh Start came as similar to that. We're growing people, not flowers or vegetables. One of the things that I see is that when people come, they bloom. They get what they need. They get help. When somebody believes in them, and tells them they can, it's like miracles and they do bloom.

MH: *What services and activities do people get involved in at Fresh Start?*

SP: I think one of the most important things is to build the community. I think what's important is that people have a place to go to just be. There are not signs with rules hanging all over. We meet in a house. It's the Fellowship House at St. Paul's Episcopal Church. It has a fireplace, and we often have a fire going. We have a living room and a dining room, a kitchen, and three or four offices. Everybody gathers together. There's a real strong sense of community. People help each other. They look after each other. If someone doesn't show up we go look for them.

We have three showers and a bathtub. We have a laundry facility. We keep clothes there. We have a small food pantry, and it's really effective. We serve a light lunch. We have coffee and pastry in the morning and lunch about 1 p.m. We serve restaurant food. We don't have an industrial kitchen, so we buy all of our food from restaurants. We accept no government funding. None at all. The majority of our funding came from KGO Radio, the Thanksgiving charity drive.

MH: *Have you helped any of the guests at Fresh Start move out of homelessness?*

SP: There are many. One of the first people I met in Walnut Creek was a man who was nearly 70 years old, who lived in a battered old camper. His name was John and he always refused any type of help. He was too proud to accept any type of assistance. He lived on Social Security.

When the Section Eight (waiting list) was opened up, there was a small window of time that opened up while I was working at Walnut Creek. Everybody I knew to be homeless and in need of housing, I got to get his or her name on that list. Last year John's name came up, and I got him to get a Section 8 voucher. We were able to get him into housing. He'd been homeless for about 12 years, and he's now 76. He just moved into his apartment. We just celebrated his first anniversary, and that really stands out.

As I said, the homeless population is aging. In November, a woman in her mid-70s moved into an apartment. She had camped out for seven years. It's just remarkable, the courage and the strength. Those are the people that inspire me. The only reason they're housed right now is that they were able to get Section 8 vouchers. If the Section 8 is cut, it's going to be a disaster.

Another one — this is the one that affects me every day. A woman came to Fresh Start several years ago, a very beautiful woman who did not look like she was homeless or had been, and she had two children, small children. Her husband had custody, and she had Huntington's Disease, which Woody Guthrie had. So she has a very small window of time to spend with her children.

She was homeless for two years in Contra Costa County. No one would help her because she was too difficult to serve. In fact, they asked her to move away from her children so she could get help, to another area. It was horrible.

She came to Fresh Start. It was like her last resort. She was in tears. The way people are treated — it's just awful. I helped her get a Section 8 voucher on an emergency basis, which you can't do anymore. I helped her get in some care so she could live independently. It's all set up. As her illness progresses, she'll be fine and in the apartment where she lives.

She comes back to Fresh Start all the time, and she's such an inspiration to me. She just went through hell because she wanted to live in the same city and the same county where her kids were. She has this terrible illness from which she is going to die. She was totally ignored by the city and the county. I can be a pretty fierce advocate if needed. So it took awhile, but we did get her what she needed.

At that time, I was working on the money that belonged to the city. And so I discussed the situation with the people at the city. We put this woman in a motel, and we kept her there until she got housed. Working on that kind of money is very important when you can do things like that for someone who is so ill. It was just terrible the way she was treated.

MH: *What do you think of the incident in Orinda this winter where the City Council backed out of making the old city library building an emergency shelter for women and children due to the NIMBYism of the neighbors of the shelter? What do you think of the fact that the neighbors did not make any distinction between women and children and single men when they became concerned about problems that homelessness might create?*

SP: People don't care anymore if it's just women and children or single men. These days all homeless people are all painted with the same brush. Nobody wants homeless people, or people in halfway houses, or mental health issues or addiction issues. It's horrible. Everybody says, "We don't want those people here."

It frightens me the amount of hate that comes out at those times, the hate and the fear. What I said about Orinda to a friend of mine and to my husband, was that all these things that people in Orinda say are going to happen if that shelter opens, are already taking place in their houses. They drink, They use drugs. It's not going to happen in a shelter for women and children. Those are people who just want to get ahead.

I have mixed feelings about that (the action of the City Council) and I think we need to get beyond working for shelter in November, December, or January, and we need to realize that the people who are homeless are real people with humanity and dignity who are outside because there is nowhere else to go. We need to plan a decent winter shelter every year. They're entitled to that.

The reason Orinda took it back was because the community was not involved in the decision. There was no process for the community to be involved. That really needed to start a year ago. What's happened over the years — and this has been going on for the 20 or 25 years I've been doing this work — is that in the fall and in the winter, when it gets real cold, everybody yells (that) we need to open a shelter, like winter is a surprise. Winter is not a surprise. We need to be prepared to have a place for people to go in the winter.

Rather than doing this last-minute guilt trip that is played on cities and counties and people — and God knows, I've certainly been a part of that for a lot of years — but why can't we plan? We plan for everything else. We plan for disasters, fires, and floods; but we don't plan for people who are living outside, who get sick and sicker, and die, because they've spent another winter outside. I've been thinking about this for years, and I never verbalized it, but this year I have. I just found it disgusting.

MH: *Did the Orinda City Council find another place for the homeless?*

SP: No. The Contra Costa Interfaith Coalition, which had made a heroic effort to get the shelter, withdrew their application. The City Council backed down because they were threatened with recall and firing of the city manager.

It even happens in poor neighborhoods. They say, "We don't want a homeless shelter here." The hate and bigotry and intolerance that are rampant these days are frightening. No one wants to help anyone.

MH: *How does the landscape look now and in the future for homeless people in Contra Costa County?*

SP: Unless there's real political will to help people who are poor and homeless, the future for (homeless) people in Contra Costa County is very bleak. Housing prices are exorbitant. People can't afford to live. Even in a studio apartment, it's $900 to $1000 a month. Without subsidized housing and public housing, I don't know what people are going to do.

And with all this discussion about cutting Section 8, it's really frightening. Particularly it frightens people who have just moved into that housing. They've gotten settled and acclimated to living inside, and they are scared to death they're going to lose it. It's horrible to experience that with them.

Bill Lunghi (*Susan's husband*): On top of that, the number of homeless people is increasing rapidly, and that accentuates the problem.

SP: Bill works as hard at Fresh Start as I do. We run Fresh Start as partners.

MH: *How do you feel personally about your work these days?*

SP: I think that right now this time is the best. It really is. I'm doing the work that I love. Bill and I were married three years ago. Everything has come together. It's a real good time in my life. The people who have come together to make Fresh Start what it is, the volunteers that we have, and the people who support Fresh Start, the people at St. Paul's Episcopal Church (provide) a real lesson about what people can do if they really come together to help people. And it's just incredible.

Ed Asner comes to Fresh Start. We had Ed Asner Day in October. He's been a good friend. I met him together with Mitch Snyder. We slept under a bridge in Washington, D.C. That was the last action that Mitch did. That was, I believe, in 1990. He's been a good friend to me ever since. He visited Fresh Start in October, and he said it's a place where people are redeemed. I liked that. I was very proud of that. The spirit of Fresh Start is really amazing.

This article first appeared in the March 2004 issue of *Street Spirit*.

Spirit-Filled Book of Poetry Arises from the Streets

by Lydia Gans

A special feature of *Street Spirit* that our readers highly value and that makes the paper unique is an abundance of poetry — poetry written by people who are homeless or housed, who have compassion for their fellow humans struggling to survive, and the gift of being able to find artistic and heartfelt words to express it. It is what gives spirit to the *Street Spirit*.

Claire J. Baker and Mary Rudge, two poets who have often been published in the paper, have just produced a book titled *Poems from Street Spirit*. Their new book of poetry is dedicated to the paper, to its editor Terry Messman, and to all the people who help make it happen each month.

Both of these women have received numerous honors and published many collections of their poetry. This little book contains poems that speak of poverty and homelessness, of peace and love and social justice. Its subtitle, "Justice News and Homeless Blues," echoes the subheading of the *Street Spirit* newspaper.

Suffering from abuse and neglect as a child, Claire Baker began writing poetry when she was in her teens. "I sort of latched onto poetry," she recalls. "I didn't know what I was doing but I kept writing." She found that her poetry elicited some of the attention she craved. "My mother said, 'That's nice, honey,' and I thought, ''Wow, that's different!'"

Claire was soon left on her own and at one point found herself homeless. A creative writing class in night school provided a positive experience she remembers with pleasure. The teacher was very encouraging and her fellow students, mostly older people, "saw me like a little orphan, and would ask me out to dinners."

Claire has worked at all sorts of jobs but she identifies herself as a poet. "I've made my life work as being a poet," she says. She always loved the outdoors, hiking and mountain climbing, and much of her poetry has been about nature. She describes her poems as "philosophical and kind of lyrical." They are carefully crafted and reflect deep thought.

Claire's own experience of homelessness motivates her to write the kind of poetry she submits to *Street Spirit*. "These poems are easy for me to write," she explains. When she thinks about people on the street, she says, "It's easy for me to empathize. I put myself in their position (and) it helps me to write." All the poems in this little book are short, none is over a page in length, and most leave the reader with a pang of sadness or compassion or an angry desire for justice.

In Claire's poem, "Books," she writes:

While too many dastardly CEOs
fudge books to show amazing profits
live the "high life" on twisted backs
of duped employees and investors,

the homeless try to reassemble
the torn-out pages of their lives,
straighten sore backs to regain
some balance toward the rich reward
known as a roof over one's head.

Now retired, Claire volunteers in community work. About 12 years ago, she became a member of the Unitarian Universalist church, the only church she was ever interested in, she declares. As a result of that involvement, she became interested in social justice and peace issues, interests she shares with Mary Rudge.

Claire and Mary have known each other for over 30 years, having first met through the Alameda poets' group. Their common concerns and, at the same time, their differences in style, motivated them to collaborate on this book.

Mary Rudge also experienced poverty and abuse as a child. She describes how her father would be so stressed out struggling to make a living that he would beat her if she made noise. Nor was there any intellectual stimulation in her childhood.



Poets Mary Rudge (left) and Claire Baker strike a militant pose while displaying their new book of poetry entitled *Poems from Street Spirit.* Lydia Gans photo

"We had a dictionary and a Bible," she recalls. "I was a voracious reader. I felt I knew all the words. I felt they were my friends. I began writing poetry as if it was a life force within me."

Unlike Claire, who grew up in the Bay Area, Mary spent the first years of her life in Texas in an environment of violence and bigotry and fear. It was not just racism, she explains, "basically it was control issues." Anyone who challenged the power structure suffered. "I knew teenage boys that were taken out in the woods and beaten — just to straighten them out."

It was only when her family moved to Oklahoma when she was a teenager that Mary encountered people of different cultures, primarily the various Indian tribes. It was her first exposure to new ideas, traditions, music and art, and she reveled in the experience. Although her parents didn't see much value in poetry, she "wrote compulsively," she says. "Writing poetry is part of my nature. I'm born to write."

Soon after the family moved back to Texas she got married "just to get away." Her first husband died in an accident. Her second husband was in the Navy and would be at sea for long periods of time. Finally he didn't return at all. She was pregnant at the time with her seventh child, living in the projects in Alameda. When the projects were torn down, she and the children were left homeless.

Mary got help, she recalls, from people who owned a dilapidated old Victorian house that should have been torn down but was rescued by the local preservation society. That was about 35 years ago and she's still in that house, never very far from the edge of homelessness and poverty.

In contrast to Claire's poems, Mary's are longer and have more of a melodic quality to them. They often seem to be reflections on her own experiences. The following two stanzas are part of a longer poem by Mary Rudge entitled, "A Child's View of Winter."

(1) The sun in through my window
when I wake up
makes me feel warm
and loved. I like to
wake up and see the sky.
But the old, old window broke, we could
not afford glass or someone to fix it.
We have found board and cardboard,
and sealed the window hole
because it is winter and we will be cold.
When I wake in the morning and see
darkness, still I know
to feel warm in my heart, to feel loved
because my mother and brother
found cardboard and board.
If we find enough cans extra to pay,
we can have a glass window again.

(2) In winter we only heat one room.
We hang blankets over the doors
and put all our bedding on the floor
and sleep there,
together in one warm room.
I like to hear our breath
in the dark, one family
helping each other keep warm.

Recently, Mary Rudge was named the poet laureate of Alameda. She has won awards and honorary doctorate degrees in the United States and abroad. Her main focus now is writing and research on teaching knowledge and skills to bring about a more peaceful world. Mary told me about working with children, finding out what the word "peace" means to them.

It often has negative connotations, she pointed out. "It was frightening to children (knowing that those) who stood for peace got killed, like King and Gandhi and Christ. And when they heard from their parents, 'Go away and leave me alone so I can have some peace,' and people are at peace now because they are dead, and then the government names its weapons peacekeepers..." Mary went on to talk about how a truly peaceful world has to be based on social and economic justice, respect for people and building healthy communities.

In recognition of her work, she is often invited to participate in events here and in other countries. In describing an invitation to Germany right after the Berlin Wall came down, Mary mused, "It's quite remarkable to think that a person with no assets and no money, just because people respond to what you're saying and it gets out to the world, they start inviting you to places and sometimes paying you to come."

The little book of *Street Spirit* poems by Claire Baker and Mary Rudge is a rewarding read; it touches the mind and the heart. It can be ordered by contacting either author: maryrudgepoet@yahoo.com or clairejjbaker@yahoo.com.

This article first appeared in the March 2006 issue of *Street Spirit*.

One Nation Under God

by Mary Rudge

With broken eyeglasses and broken veins
she stands on the corner showing things
have a kaleidoscopic other view.

When she asks spare change
but you pass by
her only response is "God bless you"
and a broken-toothed smile.
She shows you how hearts really break,
can you feel your own?
She lets you see a whole country with
a government full of broken promises.

IN THE DARK

by Claire J. Baker

I wish you
small invisible wings
to uplift you just in time.

I wish you the stars'
healing story
when you are broken,
fallen from glory.

I wish you the moon's
luminous cloak
that you may shine
in the dark, like God.

A Classic For All Ages

by Mary Rudge

Seven-year-old Diana and I
cry over Gogol's *The Overcoat*
on channel 9 now
cold Russia old poor man
even without subtitles
his face we both know.
It was cold in our house last winter
we had coats from the thrift shop
at night we slept in one bed
we piled on all the coats.
The cold old man is going to die
we saw that face once in our mirror,
and cry.

Found Among the Homeless

by Claire J. Baker

There are many
so magnanimous
they can give any part
of themselves away
and still remain
angels
flowers
star stuff
grain.